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THE MERCILESS MARAUDERS; or, Chaparral Carl's Revenge.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DICK," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON, JR.," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC.



THE NEXT INSTANT ANTONIO GARCIA SHOT DOWNWARD—DOWN THAT AWFUL DIZZY NIGHT—with a shriek most unearthly,
AS CHAPARRAL CARL HURLED HIM FROM HIM.

The Merciless Marauders;

OR,

Chaparral Carl's Revenge.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"

(MAJ. SAM. S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "WILD WILL," "KIT CARSON, JR.,"

"BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRIDE OF THE RANCH.

DEAN'S RANCH, a few miles above Oakville, on the banks of the Rio Frio, was quite an extensive establishment in ante-bellum times.

The timber of the Frio extended for a long distance, on either side of the stream; while beyond, stretched a vast extent of oak openings, and then a mesquite belt bordering the plain, which extended westward, and was an excellent grazing ground. The ranch mentioned was located on the border of the bottom-timber; the oak openings affording shade from the hot sun, and presenting a cool and beautiful vista.

The towering timber of the bottom was almost smothered in vines and moss; the vast arches and domes, cathedral-like in their grandness, being festooned with that drooping parasite, frequently called "old man's beard," which lent an almost funereal gloom to the dense shades. When, however, the fiery god of day shot his arrows of golden light through the topmost branches, no more beautiful sight could be imagined than the vast halls of Nature thus formed.

The river, at this point, was wide and deep, and with quite a rapid current. It was teeming with various varieties of the finny tribe, turtles without number, and now and then an alligator.

But, to the ranch, and its human occupants.

The dwelling was a veritable fortress; being constructed of huge oak logs, as were all houses in that section.

It was a typical Texas frontier abode, with a wide opening in its center, beneath the same roof which covered the apartments on either side; in fact it was two houses covered by one roof, and but some ten or twelve feet apart. There was a wide veranda in front, vine covered, and a cooking cabin in the rear; the negro cabins being but a little removed from the dwelling, and near several extensive corrals.

The house fronted the oak openings, its rear being toward the river.

Dean's Ranch was a favorite point for cattle-men to stop at, when starting from Oakville, up the Rio Frio, on their "marking" and "branding" trips each spring, as well as the autumn "round-ups;" and many an extensive barbecue had been given by the proprietor, Colonel Donald Dean, who, as well as all the members of his family were general favorites—his daughter, Dora, being the acknowledged belle of the Live Oaks.

The family consisted of the colonel, his wife, a fine, motherly matron of fifty, the daughter just mentioned, and a son, some twenty years of age. Dora was, at this time, sweet sixteen.

The colonel was a hale and hearty man, past fifty, of muscular build and soldierly bearing. He had figured prominently in the struggles of the Lone Star Republic, against the perfidious Santa Anna, and his brutal followers. His hair was long and wavy, his eyes blue, and his complexion florid; while his face was filled with good-humor continually, and shining with goodwill toward every one.

Full six feet in height, the old ranchero was commanding in appearance, and a fine horseman.

As may be supposed, he was one who, having passed through the dark days of the struggling Republic, knew no fear, and scorned all danger, of whatever character.

His son, Dick, was "a chip of the old block," as far as these qualities, so essential on the frontier, were concerned—he being a somewhat harum-scarum young man, who was always one of the first to volunteer, when Captain Littleton of Helena called for rangers, to repulse the bandit, Cortina, on the Rio Grande. In fact, Dick Dean often made lone scouts, in the direction of Mexico; and, more than once, crossed the Bravo, in company with a few others, on independent retaliatory raids.

He was a dashing and handsome youth, with regular features, blue eyes, and light brown hair.

Mrs. Dean was somewhat portly, had gray hair, and showed evidences of early beauty, being even now a very engaging and attractive matron.

And Dora—here I hesitate, realizing that my feeble pen can never do her justice.

She had dark-brown hair, usually worn flowing, girl-like, and hanging below her waist. Her eyes, too, were of a melting dark-brown color. She had a Grecian nose, ripe cherry lips, rosy cheeks, and pearly teeth; and was of medium height, with a Venus-like form, and graceful as a prairie fawn.

A winning smile played almost continually on her lips, and her limpid orbs would have fas-

cinated a statue. The maiden was grace and beauty itself.

She prided herself on her prairie accomplishments, such as riding, shooting rifle and revolver, and even casting the lasso; all of which she had been taught by her brother, and by one who shall soon claim our attention.

Being thus accustomed to out-door exercise on horseback, there was a sun-tan upon her face, which rather increased than detracted from her rich and glowing beauty.

Colonel Dean fairly adored his lovely daughter, and gratified her every wish; indeed she queen'd it right royally over every one, and all seemed well enough pleased to have it so.

Such was Dora Dean.

The family of the colonel has been described; but there is one, who was considered a member of the household, and who was at home at Dean's Ranch, of whom we must now speak.

Although but seldom, for any length of time, at the ranch, Carl Clayton—or, as he was more familiarly known, "Chaparral Carl"—was the one to whom allusion has been made, of seconding Dick in giving Dora lessons in all frontier accomplishments.

Carl had lost his parents by that terrible scourge of the Texas coast, "Yellow Jack," at Galveston; and, since that time, had made his home with his father's old friend, Donald Dean, who had received him with open arms. The young man, although his father had been a wealthy planter, found, upon the settlement of the estate, that but a small portion of the property remained; the elder Clayton having been engaged in speculations, which had caused very heavy losses.

Colonel Dean had been much rejoiced, as indeed were all his family, upon the arrival of Carl; and Dick was delighted to find in him a young man after his own heart, and who preferred roaming the plains, to lingering around the ranch.

In the course of time, however, Dick, although "to the manner born," found himself left in the lurch by Carl, in all that pertained to frontier knowledge—the latter becoming the most skillful horseman and lassoist on the lower Rio Frio, and admitted to be the best shot within fifty miles of Oakville. Upon several occasions, Carl had guided Littleton's Rangers into camps of the noted bandit, Cortina, which he had discovered, while on lone scouts, he having become a skillful trailer, and knowing every cattle-path in the chaparrals. This fact caused him to receive the sobriquet of Chaparral Carl.

When the two young men were together, which was quite often, although the colonel insisted upon his son remaining at home a great portion of the time, one could not see anywhere a finer pair.

Carl was rather a dandy in the matter of dress, being always gotten up in the showy if not gaudy costume of the Rio Grande; with slashed breeches of buckskin, profusely decorated with silver-buttons, and a *jaqueta* in the same style. An embroidered over-shirt, with wide flowing collar, made up his complete attire when the *jaqueta* was laid aside on account of the heat of the weather.

A red silk sash sustained his breeches, the fringed ends hanging down the seams of his pantaloons on either side, *a la Mexicano*.

A brace of Colt's revolvers and a bowie hung from his richly stamped belt, which was held about his waist by a square silver clasp, upon which was engraved a rattlesnake, coiled for a deadly spring and the legend:

"True to friends, and square with enemies."
"CHAPARRAL CARL."

Nearly six feet in height, his form was sinewy, and his motions light and supple; while honesty and honor were shown in the glances of his keen hazel eyes. His brow was high and broad, and his face strikingly handsome; his features being regular, while a mustache and goatee added to the manliness of his appearance.

There was a firmness, indicated by his chin and mouth, and a daring recklessness in the glance of his eye, which one used to characterize would at once notice.

And, indeed, Carl Clayton was one of the most daring of the Rio Grande scouts; he being reckless to a fault, and in consequence of this, and his Apollo-like beauty of form and face, was almost worshiped by the gay señoritas of the towns on the American side of the Rio Grande, and envied by his less favored companions accordingly.

Thus far, since Texas had been annexed to the United States, the life of Colonel Dean had, with the exception of an occasional fight with Mexicans and Indians, been uneventful. His home life was a happy one. In fact, it was a bone-drum sort of existence.

His stock had increased greatly, and he was in a most prosperous condition in every way; but events were destined to occur, entirely undreamed of by this happy household; and their hitherto almost-cloudless sky was fated to be overspread with a blackness and a darkness, through which would dart only lightnings of crimson, that would sear their hearts and drive from them all hope, hurling all into despair and agony, and some to death, or still worse, the direst human torture.

Could either one of those whom we have been introducing to the reader have been enabled to foresee coming events, they would have shuddered with horror. But it is our intention to detail these events and the circumstances which preceded them, following our friends over the most strange and bloody trails, into wild lands, and among still wilder scenes.

CHAPTER II.

TWO TO ONE.

At the time of which we write, Rio Grande City was but a small town, being situated on the bank of the river of the same name, which forms the boundary line between Mexico and the United States.

Ringold Barracks was but a short distance below the town, which post had been named in honor of Major Ringold, who lost his life in the second battle of the Mexican War—Resaca de la Palma—and whose last words, as his men rushed to his assistance when he fell, have passed into history—

"Leave me, men! You are wanted forward!"

This officer commanded a battery of light artillery, and a circular *adobe* monument, or what was intended as such—most certainly a disgrace to the memory of the gallant officer—was built upon the bank of the Rio Grande at the town that has been mentioned.

This so-called monument was but a circular mass of sun-dried brick, about six feet in diameter, and some four in height. At this point the Rio Grande rolled fully a hundred feet below the level of the surrounding country, its banks being perpendicular, and indeed at some places overhanging the water.

It was just at sunset, upon the particular day which we wish to treat of, that Carl Clayton, or Chaparral Carl, dashed into Rio Grande City and down the only street of any consequence that the town boasted of, toward Ringold Barracks.

He presented a picture that would chain the eye, and claim the admiration of any observer; even the Mexicans, who composed the principal portion of the population, doffed their hats as he galloped down the street, and the sporting men, who stood opposite their "shebangs," gave a rousing cheer, which the young man acknowledged by touching the brim of his sombrero.

Carl rode a magnificent black half-breed—a cross between a mustang stud and a Spanish mare—and he sat his saddle, and moved his form with a grace in consonance with its every motion. Man and mustang made up a picture of the most complete equestrian beauty.

All well knew that Carl was on his way to the commandant of the post below, with either dispatches from Laredo, or information in regard to the movements of some detachment of the bandits of Cortina, the outlaw chief, who frequently invaded Texas soil from Mexico.

As has been mentioned, most of the population, in fact three-fourths, of Rio Grande City were Mexicans; and the same was the case with all the towns on the American side—so called—of the Rio Bravo.

The greater number of these Mexicans were not only citizens of Texas, but good and loyal ones, whose whole interest and property lay in the Lone Star State. But, there were many who hated and despised the Americanos, or Texanos, and who were not only admirers of the bandit, Cortina, but acted as his spies; being ever on the alert for information that would favor the invader, who, by the way had his head-quarters on the Mexican side of the river, the civil officials aiding him.

Ten minutes had not elapsed after the gallop of Chaparral Carl toward Ringold Barracks, when two villainous-looking Greasers seated themselves on the monument of Major Ringold, which was some little distance from any house, and ignited their corn-shuck cigarettes.

"Caramba!" hissed one, with a deep scowl upon his brutal face, his lips curling away from his white and gleaming teeth; "I will split his heart!"

"Chaparral Carl has crossed the trail of our men, and will put the Gringo soldiers on the track. Cortina is on his way to the Rio Nueces, and the Frio, and may be captured. *El diablo* fly away with the accursed Texano! What say you, Antonio?"

"Santos Todas! I am mad—I chew my tongue! I could skin the young Gringo alive. Pedro, we must run our *cuchillos* through his heart this night!"

"Caramba! That is not so easy done as talked of. How can we get a chance to carve him?"

"He will be at the fandango to night."

"How know you this, Antonio?"

"He never misses his dance when in Rio Grande City."

"Yes; that is true. But if he saw the trail, he will guide the soldiers, and our chief cannot keep his oath of revenge. Cortina has sworn by Santa Guadalupe, to burn Dean's Ranch, shoot Daring Dick, and leave the cattle of the colonel for the wolves of the Nueces. Caramba! The old man fought against Santa Anna and Mexico, and I could drink his heart's blood!"

"But this Carl, *camarado*? He may not have discovered any sign, but be only carrying dispatches."

"True, Antonio; but, if he is at the fandango, we will know that all is well with our chief. It will prove that Carl has not discovered the trail, and then we must make sure that he never straddles his black mustang again. What say you?"

"I say that he dies to-night—I swear it!" crossing himself; "I, Antonio Garcia!"

"And I, too, swear that my *cuchillo* shall find the heart of Chaparral Carl—I, Pedro Lapato!"

Both men, with a murderous look in their snake-like eyes, slipped from their seats, and strolled slowly toward the street, rolling fresh cigarettes as they went.

Now, it so happened that, previous to the coming of these two villainous plotters, a Mexican boy known as Benito, the Waif of the Bravo, who had been more than once befriended by Carl, and who looked upon him with feelings akin to reverence, had climbed a mesquite tree, the branches of which overhung the monument, for the purpose of gathering some of the beans, which hung in clusters upon it.

When Benito perceived Antonio and Pedro, he crouched among the branches, and remained perfectly still; well knowing that the Mexicans were not only strangers in the town, but that they were followers of Cortina, and that their object must be far from good.

The boy overheard every word that was spoken, and was frightened nearly into falling from his perch; his anxiety for his benefactor, and the friends of the latter on the Frio, being torturing to the little waif.

Great was Benito's relief, when the two ruffians departed; and, no sooner had they disappeared around the corner of the first Mexican shanty, than he descended from the tree, and ran as fast as his legs could carry him, down the bank of the river, in the rear of the dwellings, toward Ringold Barracks.

Benito had not known of the arrival of Chaparral Carl, until the fact had been stated by the plotting Greasers; and he was filled with joy, as well as with deep concern for the safety of the young Texan.

Upon getting clear of the town, Benito dashed from the mesquites, into the trail that led to the military post; and he had not passed half the distance between the town and the barracks, when Carl came galloping toward him on his return to Rio Grande City.

The young man was riding at his usual headlong speed, when Benito planted himself in the middle of the trail, and held up both arms, his hands open, and the palms of them toward Chaparral Carl.

The latter jerked his horse to a halt, when within not more than five feet of the dauntless boy, whom, at the first, he did not recognize.

"Santa Maria, bless you, Senor Carl!" he cried out. "Benito is happy to see his old *amigo*. Come! Spur into the mesquites. I have a secret to tell you, Senor Carl. Your life is in danger!"

"Well, well, my *muchacho*! Is that you? But I might have known that no other boy except you would have stood his ground before the fast-flying hoofs of Racer. You came very near being trampled, however; and I do not advise you to try that risky act again. I was in a deep study, or I should have jerked Racer to a halt sooner."

"But, what was that you said? My life in danger? That is good. Why, Benito, I have not known a day in two years, when my life was not in peril of some sort. If this was not the case, I'm afraid I would find it a dull world. I enjoy it hugely."

"However, to please you, I will hear what you have to say; but I think you are over anxious on my account."

Carl as he spoke, guided his horse after Benito, into the mesquites that bordered each side of the trail. Then he dismounted, and asked:

"What in the name of Crockett, is the matter with you, Benito?" perceiving the evident fright and excitement of the Mexican lad. "Have they been ill-treating you, in any way, since I have been gone?"

"No, no, Senor Carl! It is not for myself that I fear, but for you. You are to die tonight!"

"They are going to kill you, at the fandango!"

Carl smiled, as he inquired:

"Who has taken the contract, Benito?"

"Antonio Garcia and Pedro Lapato," replied the boy, in a low, cautious tone.

Chaparral Carl gave a start of most intense surprise, asking quickly and eagerly:

"Are those two ruffians on Texas soil?"

Benito pointed significantly toward Rio Grande City.

"That's the best news you ever brought me, Benito! I'll have them strung up like dogs; for they were, both of them, engaged in the sacking of Connor's Ranch, and the murder of Mrs. Connor, and her old mother."

"By heavens, they must not slip me! I must corral them at once. I'll see you in town, my boy!"

Carl was about to remount his horse, but Benito clutched his arm, crying out, at the same time.

"Senor Carl, Cortina is in Texas! He is near the Rio Nueces. He will burn Dean's Ranch—I heard Antonio and Pedro say so! They thought you had seen the trail, and had come for the soldiers."

Chaparral Carl gazed down at Benito, in utter amazement, for a moment. Then he demanded:

"Make no mistake, my lad! Are you sure of this?"

"They said so. I swear it, Senor Carl!" replied the boy, making the sign of the cross.

"Run to the barracks, and tell Major Humphries! Explain all, and say that I sent you, and that I will be on hand to guide a detachment."

"Run, Benito! I must ride to town, and choke some further information out of those two miscreants."

As Carl finished, he drove spurs to his horse, and darted from the mesquites, and toward Rio Grande City.

Straight through the town he thundered, at such speed as caused all who saw him to wonder; although he always rode at a hard gallop, when carrying dispatches.

The little Mexican had not explained the circumstances in regard to how he had come to hear the plotters, or the place: and it so happened that the very mesquite in which he had been hidden, was the favorite hitching-place of Carl Clayton, when the latter stopped for a brief space in the town. So it was, that, directly around the *jacal*, and toward the mesquite and the monument, dashed the steed and rider.

The very instant that Carl turned the corner, he discovered two Mexicans seated upon the monument. Both of them sprung to their feet upon it as he shot into view, and as he rode up directly toward them, each jerked his long knife, while their yellow faces turned an ashen hue.

Evidently they believed that the horseman was bent upon their death, that their presence and words had been conveyed to him in some mysterious manner, for they appeared dazed for the moment with superstitious terror.

Chaparral Carl shot one piercing glance into the murderous faces of the miscreants and at once recognized them.

Antonio Garcia and Pedro Lapato, who had both sworn to sheathe their knives in his heart that night, were before him!

Scorning to use his revolver, the young Texan sprung from his saddle, jerked his bowie, and stood facing his sworn assassins.

CHAPTER III.

SWIFT TO LIFE'S CLOSE.

BENITO was a small lad, but nine years of age, and somewhat stunted at that. He had no settled home, but wandered from one town to another, from Eagle Pass to Fort Brown; at times spending a week or two at Brazos Santiago, to view the sea, and gather oysters and crabs, for which there was always a market.

He had many friends, especially among the Texan rangers and scouts, and quite often received presents from them.

He dressed in a natty little suit of buckskin, and was the happy owner of a "five shooter" and a small bowie. He wore also a jaunty little sombrero and a red sash.

His skin was quite light, but a slight tinge of olive betraying the Mexican blood in his veins; and it was generally believed that his father was an American, one of the many wanderers on the Rio Bravo.

The boy was strong and agile, being blessed with an appetite born of almost constant life in the open air.

Carl owed much of his success as a scout to Benito, the latter guiding him through the intricate chaparrals, and giving him information on all subjects that pertained to the thickets, and the bandits that made them their lurking-place. The boy looked upon Carl as a veritable king; and consequently when he heard the two Greasers plot to murder him, he was greatly concerned and excited, although believing his friend to be invincible.

Well did the lad know the treacherous character of all the followers of Cortina, and that the two miscreants would seek their opportunity to stab their victim in the back without warning. Hence the little fellow's extreme apprehension.

He feared that Antonio and Pedro would shoot Carl, then rush to the mesquites, where doubtless they had their horses, and escape.

Carl, riding into town, was a prominent mark.

The assassins would know him from quite a distance.

Both Chaparral Carl and Dick Dean, or "Daring Dick," as the latter had been dubbed, were well known to Cortina's men as scouts who had balked many a well-planned raid; and Benito knew that Cortina had sworn to have the lives of both.

The advent of Pedro and Antonio on the American side of the river, was evidently for

the express purpose of killing one or the other of the Frio boys, as the rangers called Carl and Dick.

All these thoughts flew through Benito's mind like a flash; and then, a suspicion was born in his brain, that perhaps there were other confederates of these two ruffians coming over the river under cover of the darkness. This must be so, or the two would not risk assassinating Carl at so public a place as the fandango.

Forgetting, or ignoring, the orders of his friend Carl, the lad rushed frantically through the chaparral toward Rio Grande City.

Well he knew that he would soon find an animal of some kind browsing in the bush; as many, owned in the town, were allowed free range in the vicinity. Nor was Benito wrong, for he had not proceeded twenty yards, when he discovered a horse, and soon secured him.

Clutching a stout mesquite stick, from the ground, Benito led the beast into the trail, sprung upon his back, and dashed up the trail in the direction of Rio Grande City. Thus it was that, riding without saddle or bridle, he shot through the street of the little town, close after Carl, and much to the wonder of the loungers opposite the bar-rooms and gaming-houses.

As Carl reached the suburbs of the town from the east, he had a clear view of the street of the burg from one end to the other; and he saw his friend, when the latter turned Racer around the *jacal*, and toward the monument. The lad had not the remotest idea that the two bandits had returned thither. He was rejoiced; for he believed that he could rejoin Carl, and by keeping close to him, prevent the miscreants from stealing upon his benefactor unawares.

Thus it happened that Benito broke his trust in regard to informing Major Humphries of the presence of Cortina on the Texas side.

But, we must now explain the return of the bandits to the monument.

The outlaw Greasers had but just turned the corner of the shanty, into the street, when they saw a Mexican ride into town, whom they had reason to suspect would betray their presence to the Texans.

This man was a Texas Mexican, and knew them both well. His name was Lorenzo Gomez.

The precious pair instantly retraced their steps toward the monument, and soon perceived Benito running along the bank of the river.

"Caramba!" burst from the lips of Antonio.

"Carajo!" hissed Pedro. "It is that devil boy, sure enough! Where did he come from, and where does he go in such haste?"

"He is here, there, and everywhere," said Antonio, grating his teeth, in rage and hate.

"He dies too, before I leave Rio Grand City. Were it not for that traitor, Gomez, I'd follow the *muchacho* now, and cut his throat. Curse that Gomez! Why did he ride in from his ranch to day? He may foil our plans."

"But the boy, Antonio? Can it be that he has heard us, and has started off to betray us?"

"It may be," said the other in vexation and doubt; "but where could he have been hidden? There is no place except that mesquite, and surely he could not have been there, or we would have heard him."

"Fear not, Pedro; he came from the chaparral above. I have no doubt of it. He is a young *diablo*, a spy; and he dies with his friend, Chaparral Carl. By St. Jago! We are in for it. The accursed Gringos will hang us, if they see the face of our cards."

"Here, drink; for we have hard work before us. We leave blood behind, before we cross the Bravo!"

"Your good health, *camarado*!" said Antonio, passing a flask of mescal to Pedro as he spoke.

They then seated themselves, this time on the top of the circular monument, where they remained, smoking their cigarettes, until the sudden appearance of Chaparral Carl. It then flashed upon them, that, they had indeed been overheard.

Both knew that they were doomed, did the citizens become aware of their presence and character.

Their only hope of escape lay in slaying Carl.

No other human being was within view.

The deed must be done instantly, for they might be discovered at any moment, and discovery was death—death by the noose of a lasso!

"Caramba!" hissed Antonio. "El diablo Carl! Death to the Texano!"

"It is Satan's own luck!" exclaimed Pedro, as he drew his long knife.

For a moment, it was a most startling tableau.

Chaparral Carl, as he sprung from his steed, drew his bowie, and stood, braced to meet the shock of receiving both his fees. The momentary terror of the Greasers had passed, and each stood, his left foot upon the edge of the monument his muscles drawn for the bound downward upon the daring young Texan; their knives clutched in their right hands, and the glittering blades extending up close to their forearms.

This was but for a moment.

Then followed a terrible scene, as both, at the same instant, rushed upon Carl, who stood firm to receive the shock.

A lightning-like play of steel, the sparks flying in the twilight; and Carl gave himself up for lost. He realized, when it was seemingly too late, that his two opponents were not only adepts, with their knives; but of great muscular strength. It was only by herculean effort, and the most agile movements, that he could maintain the defensive. To expect to bury his knife in the breast of either was preposterous; yet he scorned to draw his revolver.

Back and forth, the combatants fought. Carl felt that his strength would not long hold out, under the terrible strain.

The consciousness of this, nerved him to a desperate, headlong rush upon the pair, whose eyes were now filled with exultation.

At this very moment, when Carl made the rush, there came a sound of hoofs upon the hard clay ground—the sound of a horse at full gallop—and Benito shot into view, his little bowie in his hand, with which he was pricking the animal to greater speed.

The lad had evidently been suspicious that something was wrong, from the non-appearance in a reasonable time, of his friend.

With curses, loud and deep, the assassins met the desperate lunge of Carl. Pedro, realizing that the game was up, sprung around behind the young Texan, and raised his knife high in air, to plunge the knife into Carl's back, while Antonio pressed him in the front.

Just as the murderous blade was about to descend, the horse of Benito dashed directly up to Pedro, and the brave boy threw himself upon the bandit at the very moment that the earthly career of Chaparral Carl seemed about to close.

Right upon the head of the Greaser, fell the boy, at the same time clutching the right arm of the wretch with one hand. This turned aside the course of the knife, while his own blade was plunged with all his force into the outlaw's breast, using no precaution to save himself.

With a beast-like snarl, and terrible oath, Pedro grasped Benito with his left hand, as the boy fell to the earth, and stabbed him. But his own vitals had been pierced, and his aim was not true. Both fell to the earth together, the lad striking upon his head.

At that instant the knife of Antonio flew from his hand, the bowie of Carl having pierced his right arm, severing the principle muscles.

The young Texan had been playing with the Greaser.

He wanted to save him for the rope.

As he cut Antonio, the latter was whirled half about, thus giving the young scout an opportunity to clutch him. This, Carl instantly did, by the belt and collar.

By a gigantic effort he raised the Mexican above his head, and turned in his tracks. He had heard the yell of Benito, and knew that the latter had saved his life.

Now as he turned around he saw that his little preserver lay bleeding on the ground, and apparently lifeless.

At this moment there came a rush of citizens around the *jacal*, with wild yells.

When Carl discovered Benito lying in his gore, the face of the young scout became the pallor of death, and his features were convulsed with a thirst for vengeance and a hatred so intense that his most intimate friend would not have known him.

Abject terror and deathly despair contorted the hideous features of Antonio, as he was now upheld in air, his arm spurting blood.

Only for a moment stood Chaparral Carl thus.

Then, with a vengeful yell, he ran toward the bank of the Rio Grande, which was but a few yards from him.

The wretched Mexican seemed to realize the Texan's object, and shot out shriek after shriek, struggling with desperation; but he was held as in a vice.

In a few seconds Carl Clayton stood upon the very brink of the awful chasm.

Far down, more than a hundred feet below, rolled the dark, murky waters of the river.

It was terrible only to look down the dizzy height from the edge of an overhanging bank, which might at any moment crumble beneath one's feet and hurl him to death.

"Say a prayer quick, Antonio Garcia, for you are about to meet the God whose laws you have so fearfully outraged during your sojourn on His beautiful earth! Pray, I say, and pray quickly!"

"*Madre de Dios!*" shrieked the guilty wretch.

Then with his next breath he yelled, as he made a desperate clutch at the arm of his executioner:

"*Diablo Texano! Demonio Gringo! Viva Cortina!*"

The next instant Antonio Garcia shot downward—down that awful dizzy height—with a shriek most unearthly, as Chaparral Carl hurled him from him.

Down—down—down! Then he plunged into

the rolling waters, sending up a shower of spray, and disappearing forever in the quick-sands at the bottom of the Rio Bravo!

CHAPTER IV.

SHORT SHIFT.

No sooner had Carl hurled the bandit assassin over the high bank into the fearful depths below—an act which was witnessed by two-score of the citizens, both Mexican and American, with feelings of wonder and horror; many having rushed to the verge of the terrible chasm, which was fully a thousand yards across—no sooner was this act of vengeance accomplished, than the young Texan strode back with haste to the side of little Benito, and began examining the boy's wound.

Not a word was spoken by any in the crowd; all watched the young scout with feelings that were akin to awe—all, even the Mexicans, deeply impressed by his evident affection for the Waif of the Bravo.

None, thus far, had the slightest idea who the Greaser was that Carl had flung into the river; but there were few who were not confident that he had richly merited his fate, or the young man would not have thus acted.

As Carl knelt to feel the pulse of Benito, the Mexican who has been spoken of as Lorenzo Gomez, came up to where Pedro Lapato lay stiff in death, the knife of Benito having given him his death-wound.

"*Caramba!*" he ejaculated with satisfaction; "Señor Chaparral Carl, you have done the State good service this evening. That is Pedro Lapato, the greatest villain and assassin between Chihuahua and Matamoras.

"It is to be regretted that you did not plunge your knife in the heart of his pard also. He"—kicking the corpse—"and Antonio Garcia travel together."

"I know that well," returned Carl; "but you make a mistake. Gentlemen," rising and addressing the assemblage, who now crowded around him, "that wounded lad, Benito, saved my life. He killed that ruffian as he was about to stab me in the back.

"Señor Gomez, Antonio Garcia will never cut the throat of another woman. If you would see him, look for his corpse at the bottom of the Rio Bravo!"

"Well done!" exclaimed Lorenzo; "but I am surprised to learn that little Benito slew this miscreant, and highly gratified that the precious pair are wiped out. You deserve the thanks of the people of the Rio Grande, from Eagle Pass to Brownsville—both you and Benito. The boy must be taken to my ranch, and shall receive every attention."

"But explain! How knew you the assassins were in town?"

"Gentlemen," said Carl, "these are the two who murdered Mrs. Connor and her aged mother, some six months ago. You all remember the tragic affair, no doubt."

"I recognized them then, but I did not know of the dastard deed they had committed until they had escaped into the chaparral. I swore that I would avenge those poor women, and I have done it at last."

"The wretches knew that they were not safe as long as I lived, and they came here to-day, having planned to assassinate me at the fandango to-night. They made up the plot on the monument yonder, and that little boy providentially overheard them, and warned me."

"But there—I know now why Benito did not go to the barracks as I ordered. He feared I would be shot, and came to satisfy himself of my safety. But for him I should have been killed."

"Never again will I risk chances with two such devils at the same time, with knives as trumps. But again I am forgetting."

"Gentlemen, one of you take my horse and gallop to Ringold Barracks. Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande, is on Texas soil!"

"He is, perhaps, already at the Rio Nueces, and he must never cross the Bravo again!"

A wild yell of amazement and exultation burst from the crowd, and a young Texan, at a gesture from Carl, sprung upon Racer and galloped into and down the street, in the direction of the barracks.

A loud murmur sounded from the citizens, all in eager conversation, one stooping and pouring some liquor from a flask between the lips of Benito, while Carl held the boy tenderly upon his knee.

Soon the little waif opened his eyes and looked around him, recognizing Carl.

"Thank Heaven, my brave boy!" said the young scout, with deep feeling, "that I see you once more with your senses at command. I fear ed it was all up with you."

"You saved my life, Benito, and I shall not forget it. You are brave as a lion and true as steel. How are you now?"

A smile played for a moment on the lad's face, and he again sunk into insensibility.

"Poor boy," said Carl, "he's badly cut, I'm afraid. Hold him, Bill, until I get some water."

After sprinkling the face of the little fellow, who soon revived, they discovered a large bruise on his head, which was now much swollen.

"Don't worry him with talk," advised Carl. "He has had a terrible fall. Bill, bring him to the bank of the river. Benito, I want you to see me feed the catfish of the Bravo with the villain who gave you that stab."

Bill took the boy in his arms and walked to the bank of the river, the lad pale as a corpse, and the citizens following *en masse*.

Carl, after removing the arms from the belt of Pedro Lapato, caught up the body, hoisting it over his head by a powerful and dexterous movement, as he had that of Antonio.

He then proceeded to the bank of the Bravo.

Standing upon the very verge of the awful abyss, the young scout cried out:

"Look, Benito! Down he goes!"

Hardly had the words left the lips of Chaparral Carl, when a blinding sheet of flame shot from the dense mesquites, to the west of the monument, some twenty yards distant; and a hurtling hail of spherical messengers of death cut the air just over the heads of the citizens.

The Texan, who held Benito in his arms, reeled backward, and fell to the earth, still clutching the wounded boy with the clasp of death. Both lay upon the very verge of the awful height, not a foot between them and the extreme outer edge.

Out over the fearful chasm Carl hurled the corpse of the bandit, just as the report rung out on the evening air, followed by wild and venomous outcries, and yells of:

"*Viva! Viva Cortina! Viva Cortina, Ranchero!*"

"Rally! And at the yellow-skinned devil Down with the assassins and robbers of the Rio Bravo!" yelled Chaparral Carl.

As he did so, he caught Bill and Benito away from the dangerous bank. Then, jerking a revolver in each hand, he led the crowd, at double-quick, directly toward the mesquites, all pouring a deadly fire into the thorny thickets.

A few shrieks of terror, despair, and death followed the terrible fusilade; and then sounded the thunder of a score of horses at full gallop, over the hard clay between the mesquite mottes.

The Greasers had fired but one volley, and then sprung upon their mustangs, retreating in haste. The sight of so many men had evidently frightened them. The rescue party, after Pedro and Antonio, had arrived too late.

Doubtless they had been encamped near, for the purpose of assisting the assassins, and had been informed, by a spy, of the peril of the two miscreants, who had met the just reward for their many and heinous crimes.

Five dead and dying bandits were found by the infuriated citizens; the wounded—two in number—counting their beads, and muttering prayers, for they knew that they were doomed. No quarter was given on either side during the bloody Cortina wars.

The two wounded outlaws were dragged by the infuriated citizens to the monument, and lassoes were procured, and noosed about their necks. When it was ascertained that poor Bill Barnes, who had held Benito in his arms when the volley was fired by the outlaws, was dead, then outcries of vengeance filled the ears of the pallid-faced and trembling wretches, about whose necks the deadly nooses were adjusted.

"String ther dang'd yaller bellies up!"

"Choke 'em off lively!"

"Jark 'em up! Thar breath p'isons the air."

"Shut off thar wind, and then sling 'em inter thar Bravo, arter Antone an' Pedro!"

Such were the cries on every side.

Chaparral Carl heeded them not.

He was holding Benito in his arms; the little fellow again senseless, or dead, he knew not which.

Hastening toward the *jacal*, Carl turned to look for Lorenzo Gomez. But there, a sight met his view, which, though he had oft seen it before, caused him to shudder.

The captured bandits were now dangling in the air, from the mesquite tree that had concealed Benito from the plotting assassins.

Their faces were contorted in a horrible manner, their eyes bulging from their sockets, and their limbs twitching convulsively; while a dozen infuriated Texans clutched at the slack of each lariat, lowering the wretched Greasers one moment to earth, until they had partially recovered, and then jerking them up again.

Then it was that Lorenzo Gomez caught sight of Carl, and hastened to his side.

The two passed into the street, and to a grocery, drug-store, and post-office combined, where restoratives were given to the wounded boy. His wound was then dressed, and stimulants administered.

Gomez procured an ambulance, and Benito was laid tenderly upon a couch formed of blankets, in the wagon bottom.

Just then, the notes of a bugle sounded on the night air, from the direction of Ringold Barracks; and, after whispering a few words of cheer and comfort in the ear of Benito, Chaparral Carl turned inquiringly to Lorenzo.

CHAPTER V.

BOTH OF ONE MIND.

"Oh, papa! Dear papa! kind papa, do allow me—your own pet, you know—to take a dash over the plain beyond the oaks and mesquites today—won't you?"

"It is just lovely there, and Lightfoot does enjoy a gallop on the open, flowery prairie as well as Dora. That's me, you know, papa."

"I declare the bottom-timber seems like a prison to me, and the oak-openings but little better. Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la!"

"Don't answer until you fully digest the subject and view the situation from every point, taking into consideration that your pet, notwithstanding your very lovable presence, and mamma's as well, is very liable to have an attack of the blues."

It was three days after the arrival of our friend, Chaparral Carl, in Rio Grande City, that Dora Dean darted out from her room upon the veranda at Dean's Ranch, and after kissing her father, delivered the speech that has been recorded in the commencement of this chapter, in her usual lively manner.

The old soldier was at that time placidly smoking his corn-cob pipe, after having partaken of an early breakfast.

Dora Dean was a perfect picture of feminine beauty; fresh as the blush rose when bursting into bloom amid the trembling dewdrops.

Her movements were grace personified, as she waltzed laughingly around her loved parent, who watched closely her every movement with pride and admiration, still smoking calmly, however, for some time.

At length the young girl became impatient. She ceased her airy waltz directly opposite the colonel, and bending forward, placed a hand on each of his knees. She then looked him straight in the eyes, as she demanded, with a mock offended air:

"Why dost thou not answer me, lord duke? Art thou so deficient in politeness as to keep a lady thus waiting, when but a word or two from your grace would drive away the clouds, and leave the ethereal blue untarnished by even the mist of the morning?"

"I await the pleasure of your highness."

"I was complying with your desire," answered the colonel, puffing the smoke of his pipe in Dora's face. "You see I create clouds, instead of banishing them."

"Whew!" cried out the maiden, in manifest disgust; "don't dare do that again, sir! It's perfectly horrid. I do wish you would throw that old pipe away."

"Did I desire you to remain silent, after so earnestly requesting a favorable answer to my very momentous question?"

"I'm endeavoring to fully digest the subject, and view the same from all points of the compass, my pet," was the reply; "and I have about decided to forbid you to leave the ranch, if for no other purpose or motive than to study you under a new light—that is, under the influence of the blues, as you term the fearful malady which you say threatens you."

"Oh, dear! There now, papa, you are really provoking. I shall get perfectly furious if you don't accede to my request, and that will be far more serious than the blues."

"Only think—I haven't had a long gallop in three days!"

"But there is danger on the plain, Dora; and what would your old father and mother do if harm came to their harum-scarum darling—the mocking-bird of the Frio? What would we do? yes, yes, what would we do?"

The last words were said in a somewhat absent manner, his eyes averted from his daughter as though she were not present, and he was communing with himself. He had an air of sadness and apprehension on his face and in his eye, as if he had a presentiment of some coming evil or danger.

Tears started from the eyes of the sensitive maiden, and she clasped her arms about her father's neck, and held her head against his breast.

"You dear old papa!" she cried out, in decidedly forced mirth, "what is the matter with you this morning? I believe you must have the blues, and quite a serious case at that. You are a poor hand at driving away the clouds, I do say. Just the opposite—you create them."

"What has come over you, papa? I am all right. I have galloped over the plains a hundred times, and never met anything more dangerous than a herd of deer or antelope."

"You never make any objections to my roaming the bottom-timber, and I am sure that that is far more dangerous, for there are bears, and panthers and pumas there."

"I do not fear anything of that kind, Dora; for you are keen-eyed and a good shot. I do not know what has come over me. It is unaccountable, but nevertheless I have a presentiment of some coming disaster."

"There are many outlaws about the country, and Indians have been only twenty miles from here within the year. Besides, that daring bandit, Cortina, might take it into his head to raid on our ranch. He is very vengeful, and he knows me well."

"He was born not far from here. He knows, too, that Dick and Carl have done good service against him, and he might raid our ranch; it is not improbable."

"Wait till Dick comes in, my child, and we'll hear from him if there is any news from the Rio Grande. I am anxious about Carl. He has been absent some days, and he is so daring and reckless that I worry while he is away."

"Did he say at what time he intended to return? I was at Oakville when he left."

Just the faintest blush tinged the cheeks of Dora, followed by an anxious look in her eyes and a shudder, as she recalled the bloody deeds committed by the bandits, and pictured Carl Clayton surrounded by them.

A close observer would have seen that the maiden was striving to hide that which, for all the world, she would not have known—a feeling of more than friendship for Carl.

"He said, I believe, that he would return in a few days, if there was no need of his services on the Rio Grande. I should think he had had enough of those villainous Mexicans. They will kill him yet."

The young girl walked, as she thus spoke, to a veranda post, clasped it with one arm, and with her back to her father, gazed up through the foliage of the oaks.

The tears welled from her eyes, notwithstanding she strove to check them and to curb her emotion.

Carl had returned in safety from so many dangerous excursions that she had deemed him invincible; but she began to see that he was, since his prominent service against Cortina, in danger of being assassinated at any time by the treacherous Mexican bandits.

Although the young man had never betrayed more than a brotherly regard for her, Dora now felt that, were he killed, her heart would break.

Never until this moment had the maiden been so deeply impressed by the consciousness that her future happiness depended upon Carl Clayton; although not for the world would she have had this even suspected by her father, mother or brother, and least of all by Carl himself. She believed that the young man loved her, but that he concealed that love through honorable motives, believing that it would be unmanly to make love to the daughter of the man who had been his friend and benefactor.

While Dora Dean thus wept and thought, not daring for the time to turn and face her father, the latter was himself wrapped in deep thought and no little melancholy.

It was evident that the presentiment he had mentioned impressed him deeply.

It was also evident that the "blues," with which Dora had declared she was threatened, had already come upon her to a very depressing degree.

But both father and daughter were soon recalled from the land of thought by a cheerful shout, and Dick Dean was seen riding toward the ranch, with a horse in lead, upon which were a fat buck and several large turkeys.

Dick had started on an early morning hunt, and was returning, successful.

The cheery salutation of the young man banished the blues from both the colonel and Dora; the latter stepping from the veranda to greet her brother, and pretending to examine the game that he had brought.

But Dick was keen of perception, and noticed at once that something had occurred to vex his sister.

He therefore asked, quickly:

"What's up, sis? Are you not well?"

"I am well enough," she replied; "but papa will not consent for me to take a gallop on the prairie. He thinks it is not safe."

"What has struck father now? That's a new idea. Why did you not get up in time, and go on the hunt with me?"

"I would if you had called me, Dick. It is fearfully dull at times here, with the timber so dark, and drear, and solemn."

"Take a gallop by all means, Dora. I had forgotten your request," said the colonel.

"You must excuse me, my pet, but I was in deep thought. Dick, have you met any of the rancheros, or stockmen, who could give information in regard to Cortina's movements? I feel worried about Carl."

"All quiet on the Rio Grande, father. That's the report from up-stream. I met a herder, just from Laredo, with a herd of Mexican mares, and he gave me the news."

"But I wish you could spare me a while. I'd take a trip and run Carl home. He's been away so long, I'm getting lonesome."

Dora, eager to avoid the scrutiny of her brother, had gone at once to order her pony.

She then repaired to her apartment, and donned a becoming riding-habit; taking also a small bowie and revolver. Then, with a jaunty gypsy hat on her head, she appeared again upon the veranda, just as Lightfoot was led up by a negro boy.

"Dick," said the colonel, after a moment's reflection; "I believe you had better look up Carl."

No sooner had his father uttered these words, than the young man gave a joyous shout, threw

up his sombrero, and then assisted Dora to mount, saying:

"Strike due south, sis, and I'll see you on the plain, to say good-by. It won't take me two skips of a mountain goat to get ready for the trip."

Dora was rejoiced beyond expression, to know that her brother was going in search of Carl Clayton; and, with a laughing "good-by" to her father, she rode off, leaving Dick to make his hurried preparations.

Colonel Dean relapsed into thought, soothed by his pipe, and rather relieved from the fact that Dick was going after Carl.

In fifteen minutes more the young man rode out from the ranch, fully equipped for the trail, and waving his sombrero in adieu to his father—the old colonel gazing after his only son with pardonable pride, as Dick skillfully managed his half-wild mustang, speeding headlong recklessly through the oaks, and soon disappearing from view.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE TRAIL.

DORA DEAN gave loose rein to her pony, and sped like the wind, here and there between the oaks, at times making sudden turns that would have unhorsed many a man who might consider himself a fair equestrian.

In the course of half an hour the young girl was clear of the oaks, and soon passing the mesquite belt, she shot out upon the open plain, which, to the west, seemed limitless, the dark green line of timber, to the south, marking the course of the Nueces and the Frio, as they approached each other, and mingled their waters, forming a vast triangular section of prairie.

"Fly, Lightfoot," she exclaimed, "this is just glorious! On, Lightfoot, on!"

Thus cried out Dora to her pony, her face flushed, her beaming eyes more brilliant than ever, and filled with the intoxicating influence of the morning air of the prairie.

Soon the maiden burst into joyous song, as the pony, tossing its head, and playfully cavorting, yet keeping at speed, dashed over the plain, throwing the dew on all sides from the grass and flowers.

The sun, but an hour's time above the eastern horizon, cast its golden beams over the plain from a cloudless sky, promising a hot day; but the cool of night had not been entirely banished, as yet, from even the open prairie.

For fully a mile Dora thus rode, westerly, and then turned Lightfoot south, toward the Nueces, some three miles distant, speeding on as before; happy in the thought that her brother was going after Carl.

Once or twice she turned in her saddle, to gaze toward that point in the mesquites where she expected to see Dick dash forth; but, as the young man did not make his appearance, she kept on toward the Nueces, nearing the bottom-timber before Dick shot out from the mesquites. She then slackened her pace, thus enabling her brother to cover much of the ground that intervened, before she entered the cool shades of the Nueces timber.

Knowing that Dick would follow her trail, that he had taken notice of her starting point, Dora proceeded through the timber, along a cattle-path, toward the stream, that her pony might drink.

While thus riding leisurely, admiring the flowering vines and grand natural arches formed by the moss-draped limbs of the trees, she caught sight of an opossum, swinging from a low limb, by its rat-like tail.

Instantly she drew her revolver, but, as she leveled the weapon, a lasso hissed through the air, setting over the head of Lightfoot: the raw-hide rope quickly tightening about the neck of the terrified pony, which reared and pranced, as he backed along the path, struggling to break away.

The next moment, a most villainous looking Mexican, with a taunting laugh, sprung from the undergrowth, holding taut the lariat, and approaching the pony hadn over hand.

At first Dora was dumfounded, at the cast of the lasso, and the appearance of the brutal looking Greaser; but she regained command over herself, as the scoundrel approached, with the evident intention of capturing her.

With flashing eyes and firm hand, she then raised her revolver, and before the outlaw had time to think she pulled the trigger.

A loud report echoed through the timber, and with a yell of deathly agony, the Greaser fell to the earth, still clutching the lasso in a death grip.

For a moment or two, the wretch thrashed the bushes, rolling and quivering spasmodically. Then he lay still in death, upon his back. But still, although beyond all doubt lifeless, he held the lasso in his grasp; and Dora was striving to overcome her repugnance and dread, in order to loosen the rope from his hands, when half a dozen yellow-skinned cut-throats rushed upon her from the thicket, clutching her with no gentle hands. But, even in her terror, she succeeded in getting a shot at the Greaser who endeavored to grasp her right arm.

The Merciless Marauders.

The bandit fell dead, and his comrades uttered vengeful yells, as they rushed *en masse* upon the now thoroughly terrified girl.

At that instant, crashing through the undergrowth like a thunderbolt, shot Dick Dean, upon his half-wild mustang: his face filled with amazement, blended with apprehension, he having heard the reports of Dora's revolver.

No sooner did he perceive the outlaws, with his sister a captive in their midst, than, with anguished face and beating heart, he jerked his revolver at once, spurring his horse headlong upon the Mexicans, who had probably never dreamed of a Texan being in the vicinity.

That these Greasers were members of the band of the "Scourge of the Rio Grande," Dick could not doubt; and he was confident that a larger force was not far distant.

None of the bandits had their carbines with them, and it seemed that but two had revolvers. These quickly drew their weapons, and leveling them over the back of Lightfoot fired at once; the bullets whistling dangerously near Dick's head.

If the Mexicans were poor marksmen, they were soon to learn that the young Texan was an expert, for he jerked his horse to a halt for a moment, within twenty yards of the outlaws, two sharp reports ringing out close following each other, and echoing through the timber with astonishing effect and force.

The two Mexicans who had held Dora as a shield against the bullets, now threw up their arms, and fell backward in the spasms of death.

"Run, sis! Run for your life! I'll save you, or die in the attempt!"

Thus yelled Dick, as he drove spurs deep, and his horse, with a wild snort of terror and pain, sprung into the air, and then dashed toward the bandits. Dora, ghastly as death, tottered away, her face turned in terror upon her brother, whom she resolved not to leave in such an extremity. But a few paces did she proceed.

Like a projectile from a catapult, shot Daring Dick, upon his frantic steed, his cocked revolver in his right hand.

Directly over Lightfoot's back, he forced his horse, crushing down two of the Greasers, and shooting a third; but the survivor, being at the young Texan's left, sprung upon him, as the horse's hoofs struck his comrade down—sprung, with the ferocity of a panther, his brutal lips curling back from his teeth, and made several quick stabs with his terrible knife. One thrust entered the flesh of Dick's horse, near the spine, causing the animal with a snort, to bound high in the air, and then shoot, crashing through the undergrowth, past the horrified Dora, toward the plain north, the way it had come.

As the startled steed passed the maiden, she saw that her brother was covered with blood. He clutched at the saddle-horn, without a sign of recognition. His revolver had fallen from his grasp, and his face was the hue of death.

On dashed the horse at terrific speed through the thickets, at last disappearing from view.

Not even when the swarthy miscreant came up with the blood-reeking knife in his hand, did the poor girl turn her head. Her gaze was fixed upon the spot at which her brother had vanished from her sight.

For a full minute the Greaser stood contemplating the fair form before him; then heavy groans reached his ear from the two bandits who had been crushed to the earth by the horse of the young Texan. Then believing that the poor girl was powerless to escape, he rushed to the side of his wounded comrades.

He gave one look at Dora.

The maiden still stood, rigid and statue-like, in the same position.

A moment he hesitated; but the curses of the two men became louder and deeper, and with an answering cry, he started toward them.

That sound broke the spell upon Dora Dean. She turned her head just at the moment that the bandit dashed into the undergrowth to the relief of his fallen comrades.

Then a sudden change came over her. A look of calm daring and determination was expressed upon her features.

She stood bent forward for a moment, and then caught the eyes of the two maimed outlaws, and heard their groans of agony. She saw the revolver of Dick upon the sward, and it seemed to invite her to gratify her revenge.

This was the one desire in her mind, for she believed that her brother had received his death-wounds.

Could she escape?

Would that wretch soon return?

What then would be her fate?

This last question caused her to shudder.

She would escape!

She must see her brother, overtake him, and assist him to their home.

Banishing fear, and, by a powerful effort of will, throwing off the weakness and numbness that had been hers, she ran toward her pony.

Securing Dick's revolver as she did so, she examined it and found two loads remaining.

She sprang upon Lightfoot, gathered the reins, and urged the pony near the wounded bandits.

Suddenly one of them gave a yell, loud and

piercing—a signal for his companion to return. That cry sealed his doom.

Dora had been undecided, but she now felt that the miscreants ought to die. The world would be better and safer without them.

The yell was answered.

The remaining bandit was returning.

A fate far worse than death would be hers if he captured her.

Shrieks of agony soon echoed the two shots, and, with the smoking revolver in her hand, Dora urged Lightfoot toward the plain, on the trail of Dick; yells of baffled rage and vengeful meaning sounding from the returning bandit, who caught a view of her, as she was vanishing in the undergrowth.

Soon, she was shooting over the plain, in the direction of the Rio Frio; but not far had she proceeded, when a wild yell behind her drew her attention, and she saw a horseman in pursuit. The miscreant, who had stabbed her brother, was in full chase.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RAID ON THE RANCH.

COLONEL DEAN remained smoking upon the veranda, in the same position as when Dora had had her interview with him—the same as when she and Dick galloped, one shortly after the other, down the natural avenue, between the oaks.

Mrs. Dean was busy with her needle-work, the cook and her assistants being engaged in preparing the turkeys which their young master had shot, for roasting in the big oven outside.

Some of the negroes—few slaves being needed on a stock ranch, and few being owned by the colonel—were repairing the corrals; and, after a time, the old Texan put on his sombrero, and sauntered listlessly toward the river.

Upon reaching the bank of the stream, he seated himself upon a log, and gazed pensively upon the rolling waters below him.

An oppressive feeling, for which he could not account, hung upon him, and he was unable to say, for the life of him, why he had come to the river; it being a very unusual walk for him.

The fact of the case was, that the colonel wished for some change to divert his thoughts, which had been more than gloomy while he sat on the veranda. He found it impossible, however, to throw off the forebodings of coming danger and misfortune; although there was no apparent reason why he should entertain such forebodings.

Had he known what was now transpiring on the Rio Nueces, he would not have thought the feelings strange that oppressed him.

Had he even then, gazed to his right, he would have discovered the swarthy face of a murderous-looking Mexican, peering from a thicket upon him—a spy, beyond doubt. This sight, had the colonel seen it, would have increased his alarm as to the future.

But Colonel Dean was soon to realize, to his bitter anguish, that his sky, which for many years had been bright and cloudless, was to be overspread with dense black vapors, which would blot out the light of the sun of hope—a blackness, filled with desolation and death!

Stealthily, the brutal, low-browed spy crept out from the thicket, upon hands and knees, his long knife held tight between his teeth. A huge, single-barrel holster pistol was thrust in his belt, and a red silk sash was about his waist. Agile, sinewy, and supple as a serpent, he certainly was, as his movements plainly showed.

Slowly he crawled over the leafy sward of the bottom, toward the rear of the old ranchero, who still maintained the same listless attitude, seated upon the log.

The assassin was aiming to gain a position directly behind his victim, and to stab him in the dark.

Not a movement forward did he make, without being prepared to bound at any instant to his feet, in the event of the old Texan turning and discovering him.

Colonel Dean had been oppressed by a foreboding of coming danger. Now that the actual danger was near, that oppressiveness seemed to be increased to the extent of arousing him from his lethargy. The assassin's steel was near him.

The old Texan had been leaning forward, his elbows upon his knees, when he was providentially warned by that strange magnetism, born of the presence of another human being—warned, or impressed strangely, to such an extent, that he suddenly threw off the lethargy which had ruled him, and sprung to his feet, gazing behind him. The next instant he half whirled and jerked his bowie.

At the same moment, the bandit spy sprung to his feet; but, as he had not reached a point near enough to his intended victim to bound upon him, he remained standing. Both men, the Texan and the Mexican, glared at each other; the latter from his position and manner, showing that he expected to battle for his life, now that he had been caught in his cowardly attempt to slay the other by a stab in the back.

Indeed there was no other alternative.

Not only this, but should he endeavor to escape by a run toward the thicket, the Texan would have an opportunity to spring upon him, in the very way he had meditated doing.

That the latter would do so, the Greaser at once knew, for the expression upon the face of the colonel almost instantly changed from amazement to fury and hate. These flashed from the old soldier's eyes, the Greaser before him reminding him, doubtless, of many dastardly assassinations during the Mexican war, perpetrated in the very way this wretch had planned it.

In short, the old war spirit was aroused in the breast of Colonel Dean, and a loathing and hatred were created in him, causing him at once to bound over the log, and upon the spy, with uplifted bowie, in an impetuous manner.

Instinctively the Greaser stepped backward, the knives of the two men clashed, a rapid play of steel followed, with no advantage on either side, until both, as if by common consent, paused, panting with exertion; each half-bent, and glaring into the eyes of the other.

The Mexican was, as the colonel found, very skillful with his *cuchillo*.

But not long did they pause.

Furious was the onslaught of the old Texan when again he sprung upon the Greaser. The latter was much lighter in weight, but quicker of movement.

Again followed the clash of steel.

The scene was a terrible one.

Each clutched the knife wrist of the other, and thus they stood—thus, for a moment, panting and glaring at each other like maddened panthers.

It was now a question of strength.

He who could wrench free his right hand, would win the fight and life.

Both fully realized this.

A moment more, and the struggle came.

Back and forth they contorted, until at length they fell rolling over each other on the leafy sward, in desperate conflict, exerting all their strength for the mastery—one over the other—the colonel at length forcing his opponent to cease struggling, by maintaining an uppermost position upon him.

Astride of the miscreant sat the old ranchero, both nearly exhausted. But the Greaser knew that his doom was sealed.

He muttered prayers, as he strove to retain his grip upon the wrist of his adversary, believing that the bowie which it held would be buried in his vitals before many moments.

And the despair of the Mexican was not unfounded.

The old soldier waited only to regain a part of his lost strength, and then wrenched his knife away from the wretch beneath him.

Up went the glittering steel in the air, and through the arches of the bottom timber went a shriek, piercing and unearthly.

Then down plunged the deadly blade—down through flesh and bone. A convulsive shudder, a twitching of the limbs, and the Mexican assassin was a corpse!

Catching up the body, by belt and collar, Colonel Dean strode to the brink of the river, and hurled the corpse afar out.

A sounding splash, and the spy sunk beneath the waters of the Rio Frio, to be borne by the swift current, to the Mexique Gulf!

Panting and perspiring, the colonel darted glances nervously around; suspicious glances, as well they might be, but all was still. Naught except the ripple of the river through the reeds below, and the song of the birds above, breaking the silence of the bottom-timber.

The old ranchero could scarce believe in the reality of all that had occurred. It seemed to him that he must have fallen asleep upon the log, and there dreamed a horrid dream.

Such was the state of his mind; but, brushing the sweat from his brow upon his sleeve, he gazed at his bloody knife, examined the plain evidences of his terrible struggle for life upon the torn-up leafy carpet, and was convinced that it all had been real, horribly real.

Then it was, that the presence of this Mexican, near his ranch, with murderous intent, struck him forcibly and painfully. His forebodings of coming danger had not been impressed upon his mind for naught. The would-be assassin was a spy of Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande!

The king of bandits must be meditating revenge for what Dick and Carl had done—revenge for their having acted as scouts for the rangers, against him, and for having been the means of breaking up many of his cattle-stealing expeditions, and the loss of not a few of his followers.

The Chaparral Cock, as Cortina was called, already had his spies on the Frio; and this indicated that he had a strong force not far away.

Perhaps Carl had already been slain.

Dick had just set out in search of him, and he too might be shot like a dog, before crossing the Rio Nueces.

And Dora also—she had gone for a gallop on the plain!

These thoughts flashed through the old ranchero's mind; the last three causing him to be-

come almost frantic with concern, anxiety, and apprehension. He rushed madly through the woods, toward the ranch, which he soon reached, springing upon the veranda, with the intention of informing his wife of his recent dread experience, and his present fears.

But, his eye caught a moving object, down the natural avenue between the oaks, and the sound of a rapidly-approaching horse's hoofs on the sward, filled his ears.

It was the well-known steed of Dick.

A human form was in the saddle, but it lay prone upon the neck of the horse; the arms clasping it.

The man had no hat upon his head, and his long hair mingled with the mane of the horse.

What did it mean?

Who was this upon Dick's horse, and what was the matter with him?

Mrs. Dean rushed out to the side of her husband.

She saw that his face was deathly pale, and, as she perceived the approaching horse, her own turned ghastly, and she trembled from head to foot.

Neither of them spoke a word.

They could not.

Their tongues seemed to cleave to the roofs of their mouths.

They were dazed with a nameless dread, that chilled the blood in their veins.

The horse snorted with fright and dashed directly to the veranda, then half-whirled quickly to run toward the corrals, throwing his human burden violently to the sward.

There, upon the grass before his home, before the eyes of his old father and mother, lay Dick Dean—Daring Dick—like a corpse!

His clothing was covered with blood, and his eyes were glassy, as if already gazing into the gates that are golden; his breath coming and going in labored gasps.

For a few moments the colonel and his wife stood as if turned to stone, and such anguish depicted upon their faces and in their starting eyes, as would have tortured a civilized beholder. Then with a heavy moan from each, they tottered to the side of their loved boy—their only and idolized son—falling on their knees by his side, in an agony of apprehension that few, thank God, are called upon to experience.

A joyous, thankful expression flashed in the dimming eyes of Dick Dean, and flitted over his corpse-like face, as his father caught up one of his hands and his mother the other.

"Father—mother—God bless you!—Good-by—Dora—Cortina—Nueces!"

These words, in a strange and gasping voice, spoken with the last strength that lingered in his weakened, death stricken frame—the last words he ever uttered—pierced heart and brain of his parents, being there branded forever.

A pressure of each hand, a brief convulsive shudder, and Dick Dean, poor Daring Dick, lay a blood-stained corpse between his kneeling father and mother.

With heart-rending groans of anguish unspeakable, Colonel Dean and his wife fell senseless beside their murdered son!

CHAPTER VIII.

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS.

WHEN Dora Dean dashed at headlong speed, out from the timber of the Rio Nueces, after shooting the two bandits that had been maimed by her brother, she saw, far toward the Frio, the latter, wounded, and clinging to his saddle—as she knew by his position—and she was tortured with almost unendurable pain and anxiety; for she knew that he would not have deserted her, left her thus in the power of the merciless bandits, had he not been wounded in a terrible manner, even to the extent of being rendered oblivious to her position and everything around him.

She felt thankful that he had escaped from the bandits, and also because she felt that the half-wild steed was bearing him toward his home.

When, as has been recorded, she heard the yell behind her, and discovered that she was being pursued by the dastard who had so murderously stabbed her brother, she gave herself up for lost, as she had little hope that her pony could outrun such animals as the bandits must have ridden from the Rio Grande.

Did they not have superior animals, they could not hope to escape if pursued by the rangers, or cavalry, or such a band of rancheros as would organize and pursue them, upon their presence on the soil of Texas being discovered.

These conclusions were not such as to render the poor girl less hopeless and despairing; but she resolved to use every effort to avoid again falling into the power of the fiends of the Rio Bravo, even though she might be compelled to run Lightfoot to death.

Death for herself, she felt, was far preferable to being captured by the brutal bandit who followed her.

The feelings of the poor girl, as she lashed her pony at terrific speed over the plain, may be more easily imagined than portrayed.

On and on she sped, her pony panting labo-

riously, for the hot sun now poured down its fiery rays upon the prairie remorselessly.

At times she gazed behind her, and saw that the Mexican was fast gaining upon her.

Would he overtake her before she reached the mesquite belt? And, if not, would he dare enter the oak openings in pursuit of her?

When she recalled the number of bandits slain, and the fact that she had shot the two wounded ones, she felt that this miscreant would dare any and every danger to avenge the killing of his comrades.

It did not seem possible that so small a force would venture so far into Texas, from the Rio Grande. There must, Dora thought, be more of the fiendish horde near at hand.

How she wished and prayed that Carl might return in safety!

If he were only at home, she would feel less hopeless; for well she knew the young scout would follow the trail of the bandits, should they capture her, and would rescue her at any and all hazards.

But Carl was far away, perhaps dead; and Dick was wounded so badly as to prevent him from again taking the saddle for some time.

Perhaps, indeed, he was mortally wounded—would die before she ever again should look into his laughing eyes, or hear his merry voice.

Lashing Lightfoot without mercy, as these and kindred thoughts flashed through her mind, on dashed Dora Dean at terrific speed, nearing the belt of mesquites; but faster yet sped the miscreant Mexican in pursuit, his taunting yells shooting over the plain, and torturing the poor girl's ears. She examined her revolver, determined that she would shoot the dastard upon his approach.

Three loads remained in her weapon, but the heavy one, belonging to Dick, which she had caught up, and still retained, was empty and useless.

Clutching the "five-shooter," she held it, with the bridle reins, in her left hand, and lashed her pony onward with the riding-whip in her right.

Again she glanced behind, and shuddered, as she saw that the bandit had gained much ground.

The pony was flecked with foam, and at every bound his breath came and went in a harsh, dry manner, while he dashed on in a labored and staggering lope.

Little hope had poor Dora of escape, as she darted into the mesquites, through the belt, and then into the oak openings.

Slow, in comparison to the start, was the progress of Lightfoot; and soon Dora saw the fiendish Mexican close in her rear.

He evidently did not know of the proximity of Dean's Ranch, or else he was reckless, and insane for revenge, to the extent that he had determined to risk his life in an endeavor to capture the maiden who had escaped him, after having slain his comrades.

Dora heard the hard and rapid tramping of the Greaser's mustang on the sward close behind her, and she felt that it would be impossible for her to reach the ranch.

Could she not summon help?

Would her father hear a shot from her pistol? And, if so, could he be of any aid, supposing that Dick had demoralized the household, by returning in a desperately wounded condition?

Might not some of the negroes come to her assistance?

These mental questions darted through her brain, and the terrified girl pointed her revolver toward the demon who was pursuing her, and pulled trigger; thus hoping "to kill two birds with one stone."

She might disable, or kill, either the man, or the mustang.

Looking back, she saw that her shot had not taken effect.

The Mexican was coiling his lasso, for a cast. Had the report of her pistol been heard by any one at the ranch?

She judged, indeed she felt sure, that it had been heard; but she had little hope that the signal would be of any benefit to her. But she knew that two minutes more would bring her into the natural avenue, when her home would be in view.

Fervently the maiden prayed for help—prayed that she might be preserved from the foul touch of the pursuing miscreant.

Surely God could not have forsaken her?

The poor girl was forced to think so, indeed; for the Mexican was so near to her, as she gazed back to note the effect of her shot, that she could distinguish plainly the look of fiendish exultation upon his brutal face.

Loose, upon his left arm, hung a coiled lasso.

His purpose was evident.

He meant to throw the deadly noose over her head.

This, at the speed she was going, should he suddenly stop when the noose encircled her, would jerk her from the saddle with such violence as to endanger her life. Indeed there could be little doubt that it would kill her instantly.

This proved that the bandit sought her, not as a captive, but for revenge.

The villain was bent on murder.

Thus reasoned Dora, as Lightfoot galloped,

in a fearfully fatigued state, into the southern end of the natural avenue which led up to the veranda of her home.

The pony nearly fell, as he made the turn.

Although her life was dependent upon watching the Mexican, Dora shot one glance in the direction of the ranch.

It was her home; a home she had little hope of again entering alive, although now within view, for there was no sign to prove that the report of her pistol had been heard, or, if heard, that it had been interpreted aright.

No horse stood before the ranch; no horseman was on the long avenue, or amid the oaks, near and around the corrals.

One lightning-like glance betrayed this.

That glance showed to Dora a startling tableau—a tableau that was branded upon her brain, and caused her to reel in her saddle, faint and sick with horror and despair.

Before the ranch, outstretched upon the sward, was a human form.

Standing on either side of it, were her father and mother, with clasped hands; their faces upturned, as if in prayer.

Instantly, darting through the poor girl's brain, shot the conviction that this was the form of her brother—that Dick was dead; slain in attempting her release from the yellow-skinned assassins of the Rio Bravo!

There could be no doubt of this.

The sight was terribly suggestive.

If Dick were alive, he would have been taken into the house and cared for.

Her parents would not be standing thus, if their son was not dead!

Dora's head whirled. She clung with one hand to her saddle and instinctively raised her pistol, pointing the weapon behind her, and pulled the trigger.

This was her last and only chance—her one hope.

Was she now to be torn from her parents, in this great grief of theirs—torn from her brother's dead body?

She saw her father and mother turn quickly, and stand dazed and horror-stricken. Then the hiss of the lasso sounded in her ears, driving the blood from her heart.

The next instant she felt the coil tighten cruelly about her breast, binding her arms to her side. Then followed a violent jerk, a terrible shock, and Dora Dean knew no more!

For some time Colonel Dean lay senseless across the blood-stained corpse of his loved and only son.

Coming from the terrific conflict with the Mexican assassin, his mind in a measure demoralized by it as well as by the forebodings occasioned by the presence of the spy near his ranch, and beholding his son in the condition described—arriving home only to die almost instantly before his eyes—all this had been too much for even that brave old soldier to bear, and he had fallen forward, senseless, from such an over-taxing of his brain.

When he did return to consciousness, he staggered like a drunken man into the dwelling, procured some water and revived his wife. Then the husband and wife clasped their arms about each other, mingling their tears in speechless grief.

Soon, as if by common consent, they raised their clasped bands to Heaven, praying for strength to enable them to bear their overwhelming grief and anguish.

So terrible and prostrating was their emotion that they for the moment lost sight of the significance—the terrible significance—of the dying words of poor Dick.

These, however, were soon recalled, and in as terrible a manner as the circumstances under which they had been spoken.

The supplications of the bereaved pair were suddenly interrupted by the report of a pistol, and both became on the instant most terribly shocked.

The last words of their son, disconnected though they had been, now shot with fearful meaning through their tortured brains.

And, as both of these terribly-stricken ones gazed down the natural avenue, another scene was presented to their view that racked their very souls—a scene that bereft them of speech or motion, causing their eyes to start in horror from their sockets.

On toward them in a labored lope, and covered with foam, came Lightfoot, and upon the pony was their idolized daughter, now their only living child, while, in hot pursuit, dashed a villainous-looking Mexican, bent, as his manner proved, upon her death or capture.

While yet they gazed, spell-bound, they saw the circling lasso go through the air—saw the noose settle over their darling's head—and then beheld Dora jerked from her pony like one lifeless to the earth and falling in a heap, there lying immovable.

Only a moment did she remain thus, however, for the dastardly outlaw sprung from his horse, clutched their senseless darling, and cast her roughly over the shoulders of his mustang, her long hair hanging to the ground on the opposite side, and mingling with the grass and flowers.

The next moment the miscreant sprung into

his saddle, clasped Dora's senseless form in his arms, gave a taunting, exultant yell, whirled his horse half-about, and then galloped down the avenue between the oaks in a southerly direction, his quirt hissing through the air, and whacking about the hams of the snorting and terrified half-wild mustang.

Colonel Dean gave utterance to one wild, far-reaching, soul-drawn shriek, most terrible and unnatural in intonation, and then rushed like a madman toward the corrals; while his wife, with a cry of bitter anguish that would have tortured any bearer not absolutely a brute again fell senseless across the corpse of her murdered boy.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BANDIT'S VOW.

THE dastardly Greaser clasped the senseless form of poor Dora Dean, and dashed deep his spurs; his mustang speeding down the avenue, between the oaks.

Only once he gazed backward, and he then saw the colonel rush madly in the direction of the corrals. The Greaser well knew the object of the old ranchero. The brave old Texan was rushing frantically for a horse, that he might pursue him.

The miscreant smiled in disdain.

It was evident that he was no ordinary follower of the Scourge of the Rio Grande.

His daring and recklessness proved this.

While the parents wept over the son whom he had slain, he had lassoed their daughter, and that before their very eyes.

The main object of the daring raid of his chief had been to avenge himself upon Colonel Dean.

Daring Dick and Chaparral Carl were the son and *protege*, respectively, of the old ranchero, who had himself fought against Mexico.

The bandit had now much to tell Cortina, which would greatly gratify the latter.

He had slain Daring Dick, and he believed that it was a sister of the young man, whom he had secured as a captive.

The old man would not have left the corpse of his son in the way he did, had not this girl been one near and dear to him.

All this gave the Greaser cause for much triumph and self-gratulation. He was certain of the highest praise from Cortina.

Thus thought the miscreant, as he spurred away from Dean's ranch. Upon reaching the terminus of the avenue, he kept on to the belt of mesquites; then, in place of galloping out on the plain, he proceeded, at a leisurely gait, eastward, toward the point of junction of the Rio Frio and the Rio Nueces.

He knew that he could not hope to escape pursuit, upon the plain; and he was bent on outwitting any pursuer, in an Indian-like manner.

Thus he rode, for fully a mile, when he struck the Frio timber, and turned up the stream, in the thick undergrowth. He soon reached a point within view of Dean's Ranch, and from which he could see not only the end of the old colonel's dwelling, but the veranda. This proved, not only the recklessness of the bandit, but his deep cunning as well.

He was safer in the near vicinity of Dean's Ranch, than at any other place.

The pursuers would not dream of his doubling on his trail—would not deem it possible that he would seek to hide near the ranch of the man he had so terribly wronged.

Poor Dora now showed signs of returning consciousness and the ruffian immediately gagged her with a wad of buckskin. He then secured her wrists together, in front and awaited her recovery with the most fiendish joy imaginable.

And most fiendish were his proceedings and intentions; indeed, the savages of the plains could not have devised more excruciating torture of the body, than did this miscreant, in his thirst for revenge for the slaying of his comrades, propose to inflict upon the mind of his captive.

Slowly the maiden raised her heavy eyelids;

The dread horrors through which she had passed, the agonizing sight of her parents and brother, and the terror that had been hers, when flying over the plain from what was worse than death—all this had nearly paralyzed the brain of poor Dora Dean.

When she opened her eyes, she was in a bewildered state of mind; but this was not for long.

The sight of the murderous ruffian, who stood before her, with his arms folded, and his hideous face contorted with devilish glee—this brought to the front all the dread occurrences of the morning, with a terrible vividness, and in panoramic array.

A convulsive shudder racked Dora's frame, and she closed her eyes once more, to shut out the view.

She had not the slightest idea where she was, but supposed herself to be far from her home, and hope.

The Mexican was well aware of this fact.

He now untied a gourd of water from his saddle, removed the gag from his captive's

mouth, and raising her head, gave her some of it to drink.

Her throat and lips were parched, and she could not resist the demands of thirst, so she swallowed the water eagerly. The bandit then returned the gag, and, without a word, raised Dora to a standing position, placing her back against a sapling, and securing her to it by a lariat wound about her waist.

This done he stepped in front of her, and said, with the most malignant exultation in tone and manner.

"Look, señorita, look! You should thank me for bringing you where you can see your home. My *cuchillo* let out the life of your brother! Daring Dick will never follow another trail of Cortina. The same blade shall split the heart of Chaparral Carl. I have sworn it, and I never break my oaths—I, Francisco Gonzales!"

Only the first words of this devilish fiend in human shape were heard by the poor girl; for her eyes were fixed upon the veranda of her home, where lay, cold and silent, the corpse—as she knew—of her darling brother Dick.

By the side of that recumbent form, Dora could distinguish the kneeling figure of her mother.

Some of the negroes were there also, and these were moaning, and looking weirdly disconsolate.

As Dora gazed at this, her faculties entirely absorbed in the harrowing tableau, one of the slaves dashed up to the veranda upon a horse, his face almost ashen in hue, and his rifle in his hand. He then drove spurs, and dashed south, and Dora knew that he had started to join her father, for the purpose of rescuing her.

But she knew, too, that the wily bandit had foiled those who had gone in pursuit by avoiding the plain, making a detour, and bringing her directly to the ranch, where none would dream of looking for them.

She now gave one glance at her captor.

Nothing human was there in the expression of that coarse and brutal face.

He appeared positively fiendish, his real character plainly stamped upon his swarthy features.

Dora felt that the miscreant would not hesitate to plunge his knife into her heart, if any attempt were made to rescue her.

The pain which now racked her frame, together with the memory of the hissing lasso, that had encircled her, when she had just presented to her gaze the sight of her parents kneeling by the side of her dead brother—this satisfied the hapless maiden that the merciless demon before her had jerked her from Lightfoot to the earth.

Not a tear moistened the lids of the terribly-tortured girl. Her grief and anguish were so intense, that she could not weep. The throbs of her heart came slow and painful, like the strokes of a hammer, hard struck upon the sodden wood, and shaking her whole frame.

She longed to shriek aloud, to give vent to her pent-up terrible anguish; but only a gurgling in her throat followed the attempt.

She felt that, with one grand effort, she could force the gag from her mouth; but she was incapable of making it.

But Dora was mistaken in that.

The Greaser knew that a shriek from his captive would be his death-signal, and he had wedged the buckskin into the poor girl's mouth tightly, and in the most cruel manner. But Dora's torture of mind made her oblivious of all physical suffering.

With a low, hissing laugh, Francisco picked up a dead branch, and placed it between the two bushes he had been holding apart, in such a manner as to prevent them coming together; thus leaving open the space, for Dora to view what was going on at her home. Then said:

"The señorita can now see her friends, for she will never see them again after the sun sinks in the west."

"Cortina, my chief, will thank Francisco Gonzales for bringing to him one so fair as the sister of Daring Dick, the friend of Chaparral Carl.

"My *camarados* have been slain, but I know how to avenge them. Look! For to-night your home will burn, and you will ride toward the Bravo, beside Juan Cortina.

"Revenge is sweet to Francisco, but he must smoke."

With these words, which the maiden seemed not to hear or notice, her eyes being fastened upon the veranda, through the small space in the bushes, the bandit threw himself, at full length, upon his stomach and elbows, and began smoking a cigarette, as calmly as though he was on the south side of the Rio Grande, and not where, at any moment, his neck was liable to be encircled by a deadly noose, or his body riddled with bullets.

Pallid as death, her fair face drawn and contorted with an agonized expression, that was torturing to behold, her eyes fixed and glassy—thus stood Dora Dean, viewing the soul-harrowing scene on the veranda.

Thus she remained for some time.

Then the rapid approach of a horse up the avenue between the oaks, caused the bandit to

bound to his feet; to behold, as did Dora, none other than Chaparral Carl spring from his panting steed, and rush up to the veranda.

The face of Carl was pale as death.

He removed his sombrero, stepped to the side of the body of Dick Dean, and laid one hand upon the breast of his murdered friend. Then he raised the other, with fingers tightly clinched, and his face upturned, while his lips seemed to move.

Very impressive was the sight, and even the dastardly outlaw appeared to be struck with the vengeful appearance of the young scout's face, his manner and act.

He knew, as well as did Dora, that Carl Clayton was taking an oath of vengeance over the corpse of his slaughtered comrade.

Only for a moment stood Carl thus.

Then he bent over and kissed Mrs. Dean, and afterward the brow of the dead.

At this moment a negro ran up from the corrals with a fresh horse, upon which he quickly adjusted the saddle and bridle of Carl, which he removed from the foam-flecked black steed that the young man had just ridden in.

Chaparral Carl sprung into the saddle, and driving deep his spurs, shot back down the natural avenue.

That scene was to poor Dora the "feather that broke the camel's back," for, as Carl galloped away, she sunk forward senseless, upheld by her bonds, her long hair falling over and veiling her ghastly face, and mingling with the dead leaves at her feet.

The Mexican whirled about, saw her condition, but manifested no interest in his captive.

His teeth were grating together, his thick lips curling away from the same, his hideous face still more so with furious hatred, and a longing for revenge mingled with a shade of apprehension, as he hissed:

"Caramba! Chaparral Carl has come! He is a good trailer. Will he find the 'sign' of Francisco? May all the saints curse me if my knife does not split his heart, should he strike my trail!

"He shall find the señorita a corpse first, and then my *cuchillo* shall be sheathed in his breast. I swear it—I, Francisco Gonzales!"

Making the sign of the cross as he uttered the oath, the bandit ignited a fresh cigarette, and cast himself again upon the carpeted earth, near his fair, but unconscious captive.

CHAPTER X.

MEETING ON THE TRAIL.

COLONEL DEAN rode like a madman, down the avenue, driving spurs at every bound of his steed, the animal becoming frantic with pain and fright, at this cruel treatment from its master.

The death of his idolized son had almost driven the old ranchero insane; but the sight of his beautiful daughter, whom he worshiped, lassoed and jerked brutally from her pony by a fiendish Mexican, had set the colonel's brain on fire. The tears ran down his cheeks like rain, as he dashed headlong south; which fact probably kept him from going mad, by relieving, in a measure, his overtaxed brain.

By the time he had saddled his horse, and gained the terminus of the avenue, the Greaser had disappeared with Dora; the colonel passing the panting pony, Lightfoot, which stood but a few paces from the spot at which his mistress had been torn from his back. His head hung listless, and he took no notice of the horse that shot past him; proving, when considered with his condition, that Dora had had a terrible race, in her attempt to escape the Mexican.

On thundered Colonel Dean, through the oaks, and the mesquite belt, bursting out upon the open plain, when he halted his horse suddenly, and swept the broad expanse with an agonized stare, but his daughter and her captor were nowhere to be seen.

The colonel gave vent to his agony of mind by deep groans, crying out, in bitterness of soul:

"Oh, my God! hast Thou forsaken me and mine? Have pity upon me! Have mercy!"

The old ranchero turned his eyes heavenward as he uttered this supplication, as earnestly and as pleadingly as ever mortal called upon the Giver of all good.

No wonder was it that he had begun to believe mercy to be a myth.

No wonder was it that the old Texan, at this moment, doubted the justice of earth and of Heaven.

No wonder that he was plunged into the depths of despair.

He knew not which way to turn in his search for his darling child.

The Mexican had not left the wooded belts.

That was evident.

As the colonel realized this he galloped madly back into the mesquites, tearing himself with the cruel thorns, as well as his horse, as he forced the animal westward without following the cattle-paths, but spurring on here and there and on up the Rio Frio, reasoning that the miscreant would not dare turn toward the junction of the rivers, where there were several ranches.

Quite reasonable was this conclusion of the

old ranchero, but we know that the abductor had cunningly argued that he would be safer to take the one course which his pursuers would never dream of his having taken.

Like a madman the old colonel dashed through the oaks, his face ghastly, his long gray hair flying, his hat gone, galloping thus west in his fruitless search.

Had he remained but five minutes where he had halted to view the plain, he would have seen a horseman shoot out from the timber that marked the course of the Rio Nueces, and speed over the plain toward him.

But this was not to be; and Chaparral Carl—for it was he—saw not a soul on the plain when he galloped toward Dean's Ranch.

Shortly after the colonel sped westward, however, three of his negroes, whom he had ordered to follow him, broke from the mesquites and halted, amazed that their master was not within view on the prairie.

Soon, however, they recognized the black horse of Chaparral Carl, as much from the animal's gait as anything, and not having the remotest idea where their master had gone, they waited for Carl to join them.

Upon the young scout's arrival at the point where the blacks sat their horses, they related to him all the sad occurrences of the day.

Thus it was that Carl Clayton, who had left the detachment of cavalry to hasten to Dean's Ranch, knew of the death of his pard, Dick, and the abduction of Dora.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to describe the feelings and emotions of the young man at the startling and most fearful happenings of the day thus related to him.

He at once dispatched the slaves in search of their master, directing them to request the colonel to meet him at the end of the avenue, as soon as possible, as he intended to start on the trail of Dora and her captor as soon as he returned from the ranch with a fresh horse.

Having thus given these directions, Carl spurred on to Dean's Ranch.

Racer was covered with foam, for the young scout had given him a terrible run.

When he had realized that the trail of the bandits was pointed toward the immediate vicinity of the ranch, Carl had no doubt of the main object of Cortina's raid. That the outlaw chief was bent upon revenge in retaliation for the long-continued and damaging services of himself and Dick, as scouts on the Rio Grande, acting to assist the troops and rangers in breaking up the long bandit war, was evident to Chaparral Carl.

Not only this, but, as the young Texan had dashed onward, he had discovered that the outlaws had split into several parties, advancing toward the Rio Nueces, aiming to strike the river at points wide apart. These were the old tactics of Cortina, which promised to prove very difficult to combat against, especially with disciplined troops.

In the event of a fight, as matters stood, but one party of the bandits could be attacked at a time, leaving the others to perform their work of destruction, unless the rancheros could be warned in time and rallied to drive the Greasers back to the Rio Grande. The cavalry were now far behind, but would arrive on the Nueces by nightfall.

Carl was well-nigh beside himself with grief and apprehension. To know that his dearest friend and comrade was dead—slain by the treacherous miscreants of the Bravo—gave him the greatest sorrow and anguish, especially when he considered the agony of mind the death of the brave young Texan would occasion his parents.

But far more torturing was the thought that the innocent and angelic Dora was in the power of a merciless follower of the vengeful bandit chief.

A hard, stern look came into the eyes of Chaparral Carl, and he set his teeth, grinding them together in the intensity of his feeling. The cold sweat stood in big beads upon his forehead, as he sped up toward the ranch and saw the silent form of Dick Dean, with the stricken mother kneeling alongside. The sight was more than even the strong young Texan could bear.

Springing from Racer, Carl, as has been shown, took an oath over the body of his pard, to avenge his death and rescue Dora.

Had he known that the assassin was then gazing at him with the most malignant hatred and vengeful longing, from the undergrowth, and poor Dora as well—had the young scout known this he would have bounded into the thickets and hacked the bandit into atoms.

No man could have stood, and resisted the young scout. As he then felt, he would have been invincible. But it was not ordained thus to be.

The captive maiden, tortured to the greatest extremity that mortal could endure and remain on the borders of sanity, was fated to see the young man, who was her only hope, and upon whom she depended for rescue, gallop off toward the south; a sight that plunged her into the depths of hopeless despair, and banished, for the time, all sense of pain and anguish. It

was then, as we have seen, that the poor girl became insensible to all around her.

Chaparral Carl galloped, at full speed, down to the terminus of the avenue. He then sprung from his horse, and began to examine the ground; following the trail of the bandit who had abducted Dora, although the grassy sward showed but slight "sign."

Not far in the oaks had Carl proceeded, however, when Colonel Dean dashed madly through the oaks to the young scout, and jerked his horse to a halt, saying quickly, in a hoarse and unnatural voice:

"Thank God! You have returned. You are my only hope, Carl. My boy—my noble boy, Dick is dead, murdered! And Dora has been torn from us by a cut-throat Greaser!"

"An avalanche of horror and death has overwhelmed us. I fear I shall go mad!"

The poor old ranchero clutched his saddle-horn for support, sinking forward, more like a corpse in appearance than a living human being.

Carl sprung to his side, and taking the hand of his old friend tenderly in his own, he said, in a soothing voice, which changed soon to an intonation, stern and vengeful:

"Yes, Colonel Dean; our poor Dick is indeed dead—dead, beyond recall, and free from all earthly sorrow and pain. But, let us look at this in the right light. We must accept the inevitable."

"I, too, am suffering; but I do not allow the same to drown my desire for revenge. I have sworn, over Dick's body, to avenge him; and I shall keep my word, or else join him, beyond the gates that hide the great mystery."

"As I have said, Dick is dead; but Dora lives, and is in the power of a merciless miscreant, who will hesitate at no crime, however horrible and cowardly. Let not, therefore, the dead now occupy our thoughts; at least, until the tortured living—your angel daughter—has been wrested from the fiend who has carried her off, to condemn her to a fate, ten thousand times worse than death!"

"Return to your suffering wife, and I will follow the trail alone. Dora must be saved before night, or she is lost to us forever!"

"I see, by your present state of mind, that you will be a hindrance to me—so, please return to the ranch."

"May God bless you Carl, my boy!" returned the old ranchero, with deep feeling; his tears being brought forth by the young scout's words.

"May He guide you, and enable you to save our darling Dora! I shall blow my brains out, if she is lost to me!"

Thus crying out, the tears running down his furrowed cheeks, Colonel Dean rode rapidly back to the ranch—to his dead son, and his terribly-afflicted, deeply-anguished helpmate.

"Station yourselves at different points on the border of the mesquites, boys; and watch the plain! Report any suspicious party of horsemen to your master at once!"

This order was delivered by Chaparral Carl to the negroes; and then, leading his horse by the bridle, he proceeded, half-bent, studying the trail, which he followed close, of the bandit, Francisco Gonzales.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BANDIT STAMPEDE.

Not long lay the vile abductor of poor Dora upon the carpet of leaves in front of the senseless girl.

He seemed to suddenly realize that he was braving Fate by remaining in the vicinity of the ranch.

Perhaps he recalled the fact that the young scout, who had just arrived, had been known to follow more difficult trails than his, and had shown wonderful skill in detecting the proximity of lurking foes.

From the manner of his proceedings it was evident that he had forgotten his recent oath to split the heart of the young Texan, should the latter trace him to his hiding-place, and that his fears for his personal safety had become awakened.

Upon springing to his feet, the bandit cast the end of his cigarette viciously to the ground and stamped upon it. He then shot a glance in the direction of the veranda.

The scene remained unchanged.

"Caramba!" he ejaculated; "I am a fool to think such luck will last. Daring Dick lies dead. My knife has drank his blood, and his sister is in my power. Is this not enough for one day?"

"Francisco Gonzales, such luck cannot last."

"This Chaparral Carl is the very *diablo*. He will find my trail, and, if he pounce upon me, will split my heart. I feel it in my bones."

"He is as cunning as an Apache brave, and will make no noise when he nears the end of the trail. I am a fool to think of braving the Fates. Carl shall not find me here."

"A long trail is before him, and night shall bide its end from his keen eyes. Cortina must see this prize in petticoats, and know that Daring Dick is dead by my *cuchillo*.

"My chief must know that Chaparral Carl is on the Rio Frio. Chaparral Carl must never see another sun. Caramba!"

As the outlaw shot out the last ejaculation, he stopped in his tracks on his way to his horse, his fists clinched, his teeth grating, and his snake-like eyes glittering with fury. Then he continued his soliloquy:

"All the saints curse me, if I do not believe Chaparral Carl has brought the cavalry on our trail! Cortina must know, and quickly, that the *diablo* Texan is at Dean's Ranch."

The movements of the bandit were now hasty. He readjusted the bridle on his mustang, having allowed the animal to browse upon the undergrowth, and tightened the girth of his saddle.

He then led the horse to the side of his still senseless captive.

"By St. Jago! These Texan señoritas are like wet buckskin. There is no strength in them."

"They wilt, like a bottom-weed when cut and held in the sun."

This he said as he unloosed the lariat, Dora falling limp to the earth.

Coupling the rope, and securing the same to the cantle of his saddle, the brute clutched the poor girl and cast her roughly upon the horse. Then springing up behind her, he took her in his arms as before, and urged the mustang through the undergrowth toward the river.

Upon gaining the vicinity of the stream, the Greaser found himself upon the margin of the clear space within which had occurred the desperate hand-to-hand conflict between Colonel Dean and the bandit spy.

The villain gazed up through the trees, and saw that the coast was clear. He then urged his steed across the "open," but instantly halted, for he discovered the plain evidences of the struggle, and the leaves bespattered with blood.

Disregarding the fact that he was in danger of discovery, he caused his horse to walk toward the river; bending over in his saddle and easily tracing the course of the colonel, as the latter had carried the corpse of his victim to the bank and buried the same into the river.

All this was plain "sign" to the Mexican.

He knew what had there occurred as well as if he had been a witness to the *duello*, and he gritted his teeth, while his eyes filled with a vengeful light, as he hissed out the words:

"Caramba! Maquel has gone to feed the fishes. He was a fool to do aught but use his eyes, as he was ordered."

The wretch lingered not, but urged his mustang across the "open" into the undergrowth on the opposite side. Then, after reaching a safe distance, he galloped west, along the cattle paths, and up the river.

Thus he continued for a full mile above Dean's Ranch, when he dashed clear of the timber and mesquites, and out upon the plain.

Driving spurs deep, his mustang skimmed the ground, sweeping like a swallow toward the Rio Nueces, startling the quietly grazing cattle and horses along his route.

The horror and fury of Chaparral Carl may be imagined, when he traced the trail of Gonzales to the spot where the latter had secured Dora to the sapling. The "sign" was plain to the young scout, and the bushes, held apart by the stick, as the miscreant had placed it, showed the torture that had been inflicted on the poor girl by thus bringing her to a point whence she could view her home and the horrors he had brought upon it.

Still deeper grew in Carl the almost insane longing for revenge; still deeper the torturing concern and anxiety felt by him for the safety of the angelic maiden. Only since he had learned of her capture did the young man discover that he loved Dora Dean far more than all the world, more than life; and this love he was resolved that he would confess were he ever again so blessed as to meet her face to face.

He had sworn that he would avenge poor Dick's death; and now, with one hand clutching the sapling to which he knew the fair sufferer had been bound, he vowed that he would rescue Dora and terribly avenge the torture that had been inflicted upon her in both mind and body.

Chaparral Carl followed the trail to the undergrowth across the "open," also finding plain evidences of the struggle between the colonel and the bandit spy.

He then gave up in despair.

There was no use in following the trail any further.

The object of the abductor was plainly evident.

He had planned to make a long and devious trail, over which it would not take him long to pass, but which would occupy the time of any trailers sufficiently long to enable him to cross the plain to the Rio Nueces, where the main parties of bandits were probably encamped.

Doubtless the coming night would be pregnant with danger and death.

From the fact that the raiding expedition had, Indian-like, split into several small parties, Carl knew that some important object had governed Cortina in thus acting.

Without doubt the bandit chief had been informed by spies of the advance of the cavalry, and would form his plans to prevent the troops from engaging with more than a small portion of his force at a time.

The young Texan strove, with all his power of will, to concentrate his mind entirely upon the rescue of Dora—strode to banish thoughts of Dick's death, and the grief of the colonel and his wife; for he knew that if he dwelt upon the subject, it would unfit him for the work he had sworn to perform.

Scarce more than a moment did Carl linger at the "open;" but, spurring to the ranch, at full speed, he found the old ranchero endeavoring to comfort his wife, in her great grief and misery.

The look which the bereaved pair gave to Carl, as he appeared, and they perceived that he had no favorable information in regard to their darling, pierced the heart of the young man; and, in desperation that was almost insupportable, he drove spurs, and dashed toward the plain, believing he would there discover the miscreant abductor, whose trail he had been following, crossing the prairie toward the Rio Nueces.

Chaparral Carl, however, was destined to view a scene far different from that which he had hoped to look upon—a scene that was characteristic of the Scourge of the Rio Grande—an act, that, for boldness and daring, put all his former outrages, raids, and night-dashes into Texas towns, into the shade.

Entirely powerless and helpless, the young scout was fated to behold a vengeful deed inflicted upon one, already bowed to the earth by grief and anguish—one, whose son lay dead by a bandit blade, and whose fair daughter was a captive in the hands of the same bandit horde, who were now bent upon the destruction of his property!

Would the vengeance of Cortina never be gratified, until the Deans and all their belongings were destroyed?

Cortina had been in no enviable condition of mind as he reached the mesquite belt. Then the slaves galloped past him, with startled faces, spurring and lashing their animals furiously, toward the ranch; and disregarding, in their frantic flight, his call to them to halt.

At the same time, sounded from the plain, the reports of carbines—a rattling and continuous fusilade.

Driving deep his spurs, Carl shot through the mesquites, bursting out on the plain, only to be dumfounded by the startling sight before him.

Stretching for at least a mile, at considerable distance apart but dashing here and there to right and left, was a line of bandits—the yellow-skinned band of Cortina—driving before them all the cattle and horses that were grazing upon the prairie; and leaving, in their rear, dead and dying animals in scores, which they seemed to select from the stampeding herd, and shoot in their tracks!

But for an instant or two was Carl puzzled by this scene. Then the truth flashed upon him.

Cortina was shooting down all the stock that bore the brand and mark of Colonel Dean!

The bandit chief was making a clean sweep; and, before any force could be brought to prevent it, the object of the outlaws would be accomplished.

It was terrible to witness the destruction, the wholesale butchery of the sleek, fat cattle that must lie upon the plain, and serve as food for wolves and buzzards; but there was no force, within twenty miles at least, that was sufficiently strong to cope, with any chance of success, with the powerful Scourge of the Rio Grande.

But, as Chaparral Carl sat his horse, gazing upon this harrowing scene, realizing that death and destruction had been, and was being hurled upon the old ranchero; that the black day in Colonel Dean's life had come, proving blacker than the darkest night, and filled with despair and death, such as to drive all hope from the heart, and blight old age to the grave—as Carl sat thus, gazing west, he discovered, far off, beyond the wide stampede of thousands of cattle and horses, a single equestrian. The keen eyes of the scout detected that the distant lone rider had a burden in his arms, and was headed toward the Rio Nueces, at terrific speed.

With a yell of mingled joy, relief, and vengeful fury, Chaparral Carl drove deep his spurs. His horse bounded frantically into the air, with a snort of pain and sudden fright. Then the animal shot forward, like an arrow from the bow, straight south, and toward the Rio Nueces; its nose pointed forward, its ears laid back along its neck, which was in a line with its spine.

Thus, with free rein and spur, Carl shot toward the "River of Nuts," far in the rear of the long line of bandits, whose rattling fusilades rung fast; strewing the prairie with dead and dying beevies.

And there, far ahead of the tremendous stampede, rode Francisco Gonzales, with his lovely and senseless captive clutched to his loathsome breast, and his features stamped with the most fiendish triumph!

CHAPTER XII. SURRENDERING HIS PRIZE.

So intent were the bandits of Cortina in the wanton destruction of the stock of Colonel Dean, which they could easily distinguish by the marks, from that of other rancheros, that they did not notice Chaparral Carl as the latter crossed the plain in their far rear, to the Rio Nueces.

Francisco Gonzales had a narrow escape from the furious stampede, passing ahead of the outer southern line of the vast herd of affrighted animals, just in time to avoid being overthrown with his horse and captive, and trampled into the earth.

Several rancheros could see the bandits, and witnessed the fearful slaughter of the beevies; but they dared not venture from the cover of the timber, within which their dwellings were located, as they knew they would not only lose their lives, but draw the attention and vengeance of the bandits upon themselves and their families.

Never before had Cortina advanced to such a distance into Texas from the Rio Grande; and the scattering rancheros, who were, in some instances, miles apart, were astounded at the boldness of this king of outlaws.

The raid proved him well-informed as to the movements of the Rangers, who were, at that time, on the lower Rio Grande.

For fully three miles the stampede continued. Then, at a signal from their chief, the greater number of the bandits spurred their horses along the northern side of the vast stampede, gradually turning the tremendous mob of animals toward the Rio Nueces, and eventually heading them into the bottom-timber.

Thence, on they dashed, crushing the undergrowth flat to the earth, crossing the river, and succeeding, within an hour, in forcing nearly all the stock in the vast triangular prairie, for some four miles beyond the timber of the Nueces, toward the Rio Grande.

There was, probably, never a more amazed and paralyzed party of men, than the detachment of cavalry from Ringold Barracks, who were approaching the Nueces, when they perceived this overwhelming stampede, there being no apparent cause for the fright of the animals, as the outlaws had remained in the timber, having seen the approaching cavalry.

Cortina at once divided his force into four detachments, and ordered each to a particular point in the bottom-timber; one party to make their way as near to the junction of the Frio and Nueces as possible, before the troops crossed, where they were to await the cover of night and further orders from himself.

Poor Dora Dean recovered her senses just as her swarthy captor lashed his mustang clear of the stampede; and her horror, disgust, aversion and terror, were beyond the power of expression, by word, look, or act.

Bewildered and dazed, was the unfortunate, terribly wronged girl; she, not at first recalling the near past, so full of anguish and of despair.

The thundering stampede, at first caught her wondering, terrified gaze; and she believed that death was inevitable. Then the hot, fetid breath of her captor fanned her cheek, and she looked upward, shrinking, and shrieking in horror and aversion. But a mocking laugh came as an echo to her terrified outcry; while the brutal, swarthy face, so close to her own as to cause her blood to chill, was stamped with gloating exultation. The arm, which encircled her waist, tightened until it was painful.

The sight of the fiendish face of her captor served to recall to her mind the fearful happenings of the day; and she became deadly sick, with a hopeless despair and anguish that were quite unsupportable.

The terrible tableau upon the veranda which had been photographed indelibly upon her mind; as also the sight of her dying brother, all blood-stained, and with that awful death-stricken stare, as he was borne past her on his frantic steed, after receiving his death-wound in an attempt to rescue her; these scenes returned, in most dread vividness, to her tortured mind. She closed her eyes, and prayed most fervently that death might come to her relief.

Such mental suffering was a thousand times worse than death in any form.

Far worse than any death loomed up in the perspective, beyond all the terrific anguish that she was enduring.

Not the faintest ray of hope had the poor beheaded sufferer, of rescue; indeed there was no ground for such hope.

All was deep and black despair!

And on thus, sped captor and captive; the two extremes of human character. The one, innocent, angelic, and beautiful, beyond compare; the other, steeped in guilt and crime, murderous, and hideous as a veritable fiend.

Soon they dashed into the timber; and, shortly after, reached an "open," in a horse-shoe bend near the stream, which bore every evidence of being a recently-abandoned camp; although the equipage, and camp-tricks indi-

cated that those who had bivouacked there, intended to return.

The bandit lowered Dora to the sward, the poor girl sinking to the earth; then he dismounted, and carried her to a huge tree, on the border of the "open." There he secured her, in the same way as before.

Poor Dora would have fallen, but for the lariat, with which she was bound to the trunk of the tree.

How long she remained thus the poor maiden knew not; for she sunk into a semi lethargic state. But she was, eventually, aroused by the crashing of bushes; and soon a score of brutal-looking outlaws dashed into the camp, upon panting, foam-flecked mustangs.

The leader of the party, Dora well knew, was none other than the celebrated bandit chief, Juan N. Cortina, for she had often heard him described by her brother and Carl.

He was a man of fine physique; as perfect in form and face as man could be, with an eye like an eagle, and a step and air like a king. Daring recklessness was on every feature of his handsome face, which was cold and stern in expression.

His eyes flashed glances upon all sides continuously, as if he, at any moment, expected an enemy to appear from any quarter.

He was dressed magnificently, when it was considered that he was leading a camp life.

His breeches and *jaqueta* were of rich purple velvet, and his black sombrero was looped up, and thus held by a skull and cross-bones of gold. A golden snake, with rubies for eyes, served as a band; while the brim was bound with bullion lace.

Nearly six feet in height, faultless in form, strong, evidently as a bull, and supple and electric-like in motion—such was Cortina, the Chaparral Cock, the Scourge of the Rio Grande. The most daring and successful outlaw ever known, and who, at one time, invaded Texas with more than a thousand cut-throats at his back—the scum of Mexico flocking to his camp, fugitives from justice, criminals of the deepest dye, who had just escaped from prison, *ladrones*, and runaway *peons*; all merciless, murderous, and treacherous; more to be feared by border settlers than the fiendish Apaches of the Rio Pecos, whose war-whoops, like the warning of the rattlesnake, generally betrayed their presence and object!

Cortina caught a view of the fair captive, and strode toward her; but there was not the slightest change of expression in his habitually stoical face.

Francisco Gonzales met his chief half-way, and touching the brim of his sombrero, remained silent, waiting for Cortina to address him. The latter presently spoke:

"You have returned, Francisco; but why alone? Where are the brave *muchachos* who went with you toward the east trail?"

Thus questioned the bandit chief, gazing straight into the eyes of his follower.

"*Santos todas!* They are dead, my chief, all dead! They did not reach the trail."

A strange, fiery light flashed in the eyes of the outlaw leader, causing Gonzales to cringe, and drop his own; while a slight shudder convulsed his frame. He well knew that death generally followed after such a look as Cortina had given him.

Hastily he explained; turning, and pointing to his captive.

"Look, my chief! The *senorita* yonder galloped in the bottom, and one of my men lassoed her pony. She shot him dead, but he held fast to the rope. We rushed upon her, and she shot another of our boys.

"We then dragged her from the pony, when a man—a Texan—dashed in a mad gallop upon us, with his terrible revolver spitting fire and lead. All were slain, except myself, your faithful soldier, my chief!"

"And you call yourself a soldier, do you, to allow a *senorita* and a single man to shoot down your entire party? What were you doing meanwhile?"

"It seems a pity the Texano did not put a ball through your heart, and save me the trouble."

As Cortina spoke, he clutched the butt of one of his revolvers, and jerked it from its scabbard; the click of the lock instantly following.

Francisco Gonzales, however, had recovered his usual evenness of mind, and recklessness; but his seeming utter disregard was due to the fact that he knew his chief almost as well as he did himself.

Tearing open his shirt, and baring his yellow breast, the apparently doomed man said, without the slightest show of fear:

"Shoot, my chief! It is an honor to die by the hand of Cortina. But you have not heard the whole of my story."

"My *cuchillo* let out the life blood of the Texan who shot my men, and the *senorita* is before you.

"There is grief and mourning at Dean's Ranch, Colonel Dean cares not how many of his beevies you shoot. Death would be welcome to him."

The eyes of the bandit chief were filled with a curious expression as he returned:

"Speak! I like not for a man to tell me but half his story. Provoke me no further, Francisco Gonzales, or the wolves of the Rio Nueces shall gnaw your bones. Speak, I say!"

"Who is the senorita, and who the Texan whose blood stains your knife?"

The outlaw straightened himself proudly, raised his right arm, and pointed his index finger directly at Dora, as he replied:

"The senorita at the tree yonder is the sister of Daring Dick and the daughter of Colonel Dean."

"Daring Dick has followed his last trail."

"My *cuchillo* pierced him in a half-dozen places, but he clung to his saddle, until his horse carried him home. His father and mother weep over his corpse; and their hearts are tortured beyond this grief, for their daughter has disappeared."

"She is the captive of Francisco Gonzales, and he now delivers her to his chief, Cortina, el *Ranchero*!"

The bandit leader thrust his revolver again in its scabbard. He then extended his hand to his follower, saying:

"Pardon, my brave soldier! You have done well this day. Colonel Dean and Chaparral Carl will now know, that when Cortina swears revenge, he keeps his oath."

"But I have only commenced. You have accomplished more than all the command, and I shall not forget it. The senorita remains in your charge. You need rest, and we all have work for to-night."

"The cavalry will find that Cortina banishes sleep, when on Texas soil."

Francisco grasped the extended hand of his chief, removing his sombrero at the same time, while he said with joy and gratitude:

"A thousand thanks, my chief! A thousand thanks!"

Then Cortina strode toward Dora Dean.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DOVE IN THE EAGLE'S NEST.

THE sun sunk below the western horizon line, soon leaving the yellow moon mistress of the heavens, and casting her silvery light upon the earth; upon scenes on the Nueces, and the Frio, and upon the crescent-shaped prairie between them, that must now claim our inspection and attention.

Directly south from Dean's Ranch was encamped the detachment of cavalry from Ringold Barracks, under Major Humphries; both men and horses weary and worn, after their long march over the dry, parched plains.

The soldiers were now busied in preparing supper.

The commandant had dispatched two men through the timber to the north plain to inspect it; and the dead cattle had been discovered, proving the presence of Cortina and his band.

Had the outlaw chief, after finishing his cowardly work, galloped back to the Rio Grande?

This was the question that Major Humphries now asked himself. The tremendous stampede was no mystery to the officer, but the wanton shooting of the cattle was a perplexing puzzle.

This was a new departure for the bandit chief.

Cortina's usual method was to stampede the stock across the Rio Grande, and dispose of the same.

Was his force now too small to follow the stampede after discovering his command?

This seemed the only reasonable solution for the absence of the bandits in the rear of the vast herd.

It might have been that Cortina reasoned he could not hope to drive the herd such a long distance, especially after discovering the cavalry.

This seemed a reasonable supposition. It was, in fact, the only one that came to the mind of the major, who had hopes that the daring bandit was still in the vicinity, and he would yet have a chance to engage him in battle.

If Chaparral Carl would only return, the commandant felt sure that the young scout would have important information.

Ten thousand men might be secreted within a mile of his camp and their presence remain undetected in those dense shades.

Very impatiently Major Humphries paced back and forth on the leaf-carpeted earth beneath the trees, soon dispatching a half-dozen men, in as many directions, to ascertain if there were any indications of the bandits.

Had he known that nearly a score of the yellow-skinned marauders were crouched in the thickets within a quarter of a mile of his camp, down the river, the bugle would have sounded "boots and saddles" at once—supper or no supper.

Had he known that three more parties of Greasers were located at different points up the river, all ready for action, he would have been satisfied that the coming night would bring him plenty of work to do.

But even had the major known all these particulars, he would not have dreamed that the events of the coming night could possibly occur, as they were fated to.

The glow in the west became more and more dim.

The silvery moon became more and more bright.

At four different points within the distance of two miles, each within thicket-screened openings, were as many parties of low-browed, murderous looking Mexicans, many of them wearing red flannel shirts, notwithstanding this color offered a fair mark for an enemy, even in the moonlight.

Their black, serpent-like eyes flashed, darting glances nervously on every side, for all realized that their position was one of extreme danger—that death might overtake them at any moment, and there was little chance for them to ever press the sod of Mexico, unless they fought like demons, and dashed like lightning in their retreat toward the Rio Grande.

Outside of each circle of thickets lay, flat on their stomachs, keen-eyed sentinels; while the horses, fully equipped, were held in hand by the riders. These leaned against their mustangs, smoking cigarettes—notwithstanding the fumes might betray their presence—for a Mexican will roll and smoke his cigarette, even when he is aware that it may betray him to almost certain death.

At the most westerly located party of bandits where Dora Dean was secured, the prince-like form of Juan Cortina, the Scourge, stood for a moment gazing upon his men. All except one were posted by their horses, apparently ready for a dash.

He, Francisco Gonzales, lay stretched upon the ground before the fair girl whom he had torn from her home and parents, after killing her loved brother.

Poor Dora had again relapsed into insensibility, the accumulation of horrors having nearly paralyzed her, both mentally and physically. Death would have been a mercy to the terribly wronged girl.

Her long hair hung, sweeping the leafy sward in front of her, her form hanging limp from the waist up, and only sustained by the bonds about her waist, which held her to the trunk of the huge tree. The face of the angelic sufferer was hidden from view.

It was a sight to have melted a heart of stone; to have created in any one, with a spark of mercy, or of manhood in his "make-up," an insane longing to avenge her wrongs—to cut her free, and send her persecutors before the God of justice and humanity, to answer for their cowardly crimes.

Yet no mercy was there in the eye, or in the face of that fiend before her; and, as for Cortina, he seemed to ignore her presence altogether. His position in the enemy's country, and his intricate planning for revenge and escape, occupying his mind, as was evident from his manner.

The bandit chief stood by the side of a magnificent black horse, long limbed, and with flashing and fiery eyes; the animal stepping nervously about, and pawing the earth, as if eager to bound free from the timber, and over the broad plain.

Marked for great speed was the animal, as well as striking in its superb proportions.

As Cortina stood thus, evidently in a deep study, at times casting glances to the east side of the "open," as if expecting some one, listening intently all the while; one of his ruffianly followers darted, half-bent from the point mentioned, in a stealthy manner, and then straightening erect, strode hastily to the side of his chief, touching the brim of his sombrero in salute, as he said, quickly:

"The cavalry have camped near the *careta* trail, my chief. They are within fifty yards, to the east of the ford, and have sent out six soldiers singly in different directions, as spies. One comes this way."

"Castro," said the bandit chief, addressing one of his men, and pointing toward the plain; "you can throw the lasso better than any of this party. Go!"

Turning to the spy, who had given the information, Cortina continued:

"Return quickly! Go to every detachment of our men, even beyond the cavalry camp, and bid them lasso the spy cavalrymen. Blindfold them, and when they hear a volley at this spot, shoot them in the back."

"Then mount and obey the instructions I have given. We will show the major from Ringold Barracks a new style of military movements, that is original, and will somewhat puzzle him, I think."

"By all the fiends! The rancheros of the lower Frio and Nueces shall have cause to remember this night and Juan Cortina—curse me if they shall not, especially Colonel Dean!"

"Five hundred pesos to the man who brings one of the ears of Chaparral Carl! Go, Roque Benivedas! Go, and see that the Gringos do not discover you!"

The spy darted through the bushes, eastward, at great speed.

Castro, the expert lassoist, had bounded on his mission immediately; as there was a clear avenue, leaf strewn, nearly to the plain, which drowned the hoof sounds of his horse.

Cortina leaned his elbow on his saddle, stroking the mane of his horse.

All was still, except the slight rattle of

champed bits, and the dull, sodden sound of hoofs upon the soft sward, as the mustangs stamped off the torturing flies, and the musical ripple of the river close at hand.

Occasionally, however, could be heard the hoot of an owl, the shriek of a distant panther, and the barking of coyotes on the plain; these animals, as well as the gray wolves, having scented the extensive feast that had been furnished them by the Scourge of the Rio Grande.

Thus, ten minutes passed. Then, down the narrow avenue, dashed Castro, leading a cavalry horse; a soldier in the saddle, his uniform proclaiming the branch of the United States army to which he belonged.

This soldier's arms were held tight to his side by the noose of a lasso; the slack having been wound about him in many coils, after the successful cast of the rope.

His face was pale as death, but there was no sign of fear in his blazing, defiant eye, as he gazed straight into the face of Cortina.

Not a word spoke the bandit chief. He only pointed, significantly, to the side of the "open."

Not a word spoke the soldier, but his gaze spoke volumes. Defiance, most reckless, flashed from his eyes, and was betrayed by the expression of his face. This was deathly pale with indignation, at having been lassoed, in a cowardly manner, from a covert.

Castro needed no instructions.

He had officiated on like occasions before.

Quickly he jerked the soldier from his saddle to the earth, and roughly bound his legs together with another lariat; blinding his eyes with a kerchief, and placing him upon his knees, facing the thicket.

The bandits gazed expectantly at their chief, who, by pointing his finger, indicated which of them were to act as executioners.

Six outlaws, cowardly miscreants, now took their *escopetas* from their saddle-horns, and striding forward, stood in line, in the rear of the kneeling soldier, and but ten paces from him.

Cortina gazed up at the moon, as if to note the time. He then gave a sharp whistle.

Instantly the click of a half dozen carbines sounded on the air, causing the soldier to start, and shudder in every limb.

A second sharp whistle cut the air, followed by a sheet of flame, and the thunderous report of the six rifles, that carried ounce balls.

With a shriek that was most blood-curdling, and which was echoed by another, most piercing, and filled with horror, from poor Dora Dean, who had revived, the soldier sprung into the air, and then fell prone upon the sward, face downward, his vitals, riddled and lacerated by the leaden spheres!

A peculiar signal, in imitation of the night-cry of the chaparral cock, then came from the lips of the bandit leader; and every man sprung to the side of his mustang, the shooting-party reloading hastily.

Probably five minutes elapsed, all listening intently.

Then, from down the Rio Nueces, came a far-sounding volley from carbines; then another, and shortly another.

A yell of exultation and triumph burst from the throats of the miscreant Mexicans, as three piercing cries, in imitation of the Chaparral Cock, as before, came from the lips of their chief; and every outlaw sprung into his saddle, all galloping headlong after Cortina, toward the plain, where, within the border of the undergrowth, they could gaze out over the plain, and await the appearance of the next actors in the tragic drama that had been arranged for the night.

Thus it happened, that Francisco Gonzales was left alone, to guard the hapless maiden, whom he had torn from her home.

She now stood, bound to the tree in a torturing manner, her limbs benumbed—stood thus, with disheveled hair, ghastly and deathlike face, and starting eyes—her gaze fixed, frozen upon the dead, outstretched form of the murdered soldier; staring upon him, with her almost colorless lips apart, fascinated by a horror that was unspeakable, so deep, so agonizing, that her own torture and deadly danger were for the time banished.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BODY OF THIS DEATH.

CHAPARRAL CARL, upon reaching the timber of the Nueces, well knew that the north side of the stream would be the lurking place for the bandits.

He could not hope to pass through, on that side, without being discovered by some of the outlaws, left in the camps to guard the extra horses.

The young scout realized that the bandit chief was determined upon ruining the old ranchero, out of revenge, not only for what he and Dick had done, but because of Colonel Dean's service in the Mexican war. For Cortina often asserted, that he waged war, only in retaliation: the Americans having unjustly wrested from his native country vast territory, besides butchering his fellow countrymen without number.

When Carl crossed the river, he turned west, passing through the towering timber parallel with the stream; the undergrowth screening him from the view of any Mexicans on the opposite side.

Thus he proceeded, striving all the while to control himself, to curb his intense longing for vengeance upon those who had slain his friend, and abducted the one whom he loved best on earth.

He longed to plunge into the river, swim across, and charge in among the bandit horde, spreading death among them; even did he lose his own life.

This, however, would avail him nothing.

It would not save Dora from the worse than death, that threatened her.

He dared not think of the terrible mental torture, from which the maiden must be suffering. Were he to dwell upon it, he feared that he would become insane.

On he went, therefore, darting lightning glances across the river, when the opportunity offered; and at times halting, to listen intently, keeping in mind the one grand object before him.

He had caught a glimpse of the detachment of cavalry, as he reached the south bank, when fording the river; but he felt that his duty was to rescue Dora in his own way. If a charge were made into the bandit camps, to save the maiden, some miscreant would doubtless stab her to the heart.

She would not be the first woman slain by the outlaws of the Bravo.

After a long and winding route, Carl eventually reached a point, from which he could see the slight glow of a camp-fire, on the opposite side of the river.

Providentially, the young man had chanced to turn near the stream, at the very place where the head-quarters of the bandit chief was situated, and where Dora Dean was secured to the tree.

Quickly guiding his horse further from the stream, into the dense thickets, where the stamping of the animal would not be heard on the other side, Carl secured the beast, and then, leaving his carbine hidden near, he stealthily stole to the bank of the Nueces.

The young scout did not care to swim the river, as, with saturated buckskin clothing, his movements would be impeded; and again he might find difficulty in surmounting the opposite bank.

Fortunately for him, at this point a huge tree had been partially undermined by the rushing waters, and leaned over the river, its branches interlocked with those on the further side.

The sun had now set, and the moon shot arrows and bars of light down into the bottom-timber, turning the waters in places into seeming molten silver, and giving sufficient light for him to see his way.

It occupied Carl but a short time to gain a position on the opposite side of the river. Once there and in biding, he listened for the faintest sounds.

The joy and relief of the young man may be imagined when he found himself within the branches of the same tree to which Dora was bound.

But he soon perceived that the poor girl was senseless. There she was, just below him, her form bent forward, and seemingly lifeless.

The sight was terrible to behold, and it required a great effort of will for Carl to tear his gaze from her long enough to examine the bandit camp, and calculate his chance for rescuing her.

When he did glance about the "open," his teeth grated together with fury, and a longing for revenge. His fingers clutched the limbs of the tree until the blood was forced from them; for there, nearly beneath his covert, stood Cortina the Scourge, while nearly a score of the bandit's followers stood by their horses, as if about to depart on some errand of devastation and death.

Instinctively Cheparral Carl grasped the butt of his revolver, his eyes glaring insanely, his face drawn and ghastly, his teeth set, and he trembling with the intensity of his hatred and vengeful feelings.

But he restrained himself, knowing that any desperate act of his would prevent the rescue of Dora Dean—perhaps be the signal of her death.

Directly in front of Dora lay a brutal-looking bandit, his murderous gaze fastened upon the captive; and Carl at once decided that this outlaw was the one who had abducted the maiden in a manner that was too inhuman even to think of.

The position of this outlaw rendered it necessary for Carl to use great caution. Were he only to dislodge a piece of bark from the tree, and allow the same to drop downward, it would awaken suspicion, and cause search to be made.

Consequently the young scout remained perfectly still and silent as death itself.

But a little time passed, when the spy darted from the thickets with his information in regard to the cavalry. The next moment, Castro, the lassoist expert, hastened on his cow-

ardly errand, and the spy departed on his mission.

When the soldier, who was well known to Carl, was brought in bound and placed upon his knee, Carl could scarce control himself. Large beads of cold perspiration stood upon his forehead, his breath was almost suspended, and when the shooting-party arranged themselves, the young scout covered his eyes with his hands to shut out the sight of the cold-blooded murderer.

A horrible fascination, however, forced Carl to remove his hands, and his gaze became fixed upon the doomed soldier, whose whispered prayerful utterances he heard distinctly. Each word shot through the listening young man's brain, like a bolt of red-hot steel.

When the thunderous volley rung out, and the ill-starred cavalryman sprung upward, and then forward, with a death bound, Carl sunk back upon the limb that he bestrode, trembling violently, in his endeavor to keep from groaning aloud, in his horror at the dastardly deed.

Not until Cortina and his particular bodyguard had dashed out of the open, and toward the plain, did the young Texan recover himself.

The next moment, his heart bounded with relief and joy, hope filled his mind; for a partial revenge, and the rescue of Dora, seemed not only possible, but easy of accomplishment, did he only proceed in a silent and stealthy manner.

Instantly Carl formed a plan of procedure.

Like a panther, he crawled through the limbs to the opposite side of the tree; and keeping its trunk between himself and the reclining bandit, Francisco Gonzales, he descended slowly and with the greatest care.

He had seen that Dora had regained consciousness; indeed her shriek was an echo to the last outcry of the murdered soldier.

In the condition of mind in which Carl now was, he was irresistible.

No half-dozen ordinary men could have withstood his vengeful onslaught; and the slayer of Dick, and abductor of Dora, would be but as a straw in his hands. Had he known that the bandit below him was indeed the murderer of his prairie pard, he would not have spared him for a single moment.

Soon, Carl gained a position on the lower limbs; and, to his relief, saw that the bandit had arisen to a sitting posture, and was rolling a cigarette.

This was the grand opportunity.

The young Texan jerked his bowie, and in one mad bound, landed at the side of the Mexican, clutching his throat in a vise-like grip, and then pressing him quickly to the earth.

Never, perhaps, was a human being more dumfounded and terrified, than was Francisco Gonzales.

The eyes of the outlaw started from their sockets, his face turned ghastly, and then nearly black; his tongue protruding, as the young scout's grip of iron, shut off all power to breathe.

Struggling spasmodically, his limbs thrashing the earth, and beating the air, while he clutched at the terrible arm that commanded his life, the Greaser presented a sight that was repulsive in the extreme to contemplate; and doubtless Carl would have strangled him then and there, but for the outcry of joy and relief that then fell on his ear. This came from poor Dora.

The captive girl recognized Carl, and realized that she was to be rescued from the dread fate, which she had believed was inevitable—a fate infinitely more to be dreaded than death.

This cry recalled Carl from the depths of insane revenge, and he at once bound the bandit, hand and foot, with a lariat which lay near upon the sward.

This done, Carl sprung to the side of Dora.

He slashed loose the maiden's bonds and folded her to his breast.

The captive girl, almost helpless, burst into tears, which relieved her tortured brain.

"Oh, Carl!" she exclaimed, "do not leave me! Carry me home! Do, please, carry me home!"

The heart of the brave young Texan bounded with joy, while his lips trembled with the intensity of his feelings.

Dora Dean loved him.

He knew this now.

It was more than he had dared dream.

He was beside himself with ecstatic bliss. Little recked he then for anything beside.

"Thank God! I have you safe," he cried. "But this is no place to linger. All around us is filled with death. But no one shall tear you from me while I have life. Answer me one question, Dora, my darling."

"Is this miscreant the same who stole you from your home in the way that the negroes described it to me?"

"Yes, Carl," answered the young girl, with a shudder; "and he it is who stabbed my brother. Oh, Dick! He is dead—dead!"

"Great God!"

This was all that the young scout said, as he caught up Dora, and carried her into the thicket.

"Do not leave me, Carl," she said, pleadingly.

"I must have my revenge, Dora; I have sworn it, and I will keep my oath!"

So saying, Carl rushed to the cove, where lay a mass of drift-logs. With herculean strength, he hurled two of these into the water, leaving the ends upon the shore. Then he returned to the camp, and dragged the bound outlaw to the bank.

Securing the two logs together, Carl laid the dead soldier and Francisco upon them, tying both fast; the face of the dead close to that of the living.

"Farewell, vile miscreant!" he said; "but I'll see you again, I fancy. This man's comrades will welcome you down the river. Go, dastardly assassin, on your voyage to death!"

With these words, Carl launched the logs into the current, and the dead and living shot down the stream, a shriek of horror coming from the Mexican's throat. Just then the sound of approaching horses was heard from the plain. Carl could not pause.

He caught up Dora, sprung over the bank, and swam desperately toward the darkness on the opposite bank; the current carrying them downstream from the view of Cortina and his men, whose curses rent the air when they found the camp deserted and the captive gone, as well as the corpse and Francisco Gonzales.

CHAPTER XV.

THE YOUNG TEXAN'S VENGEANCE.

The mind of Chaparral Carl was in such a demoralized state, that, when he was in the bandit camp, he took no notice of the opposite side of the river. Not until he reached it, sustaining Dora, did he perceive that it was impossible for him to surmount the perpendicular bank; but, happily, there were reeds growing at the base of it, into which he glided, and was thus screened from the view of the bandits and their chief.

These rode up, cursing, but became silent at the order of Cortina, and listened intently for a repetition of the shriek that had caused them to leave their position, and return to the camp.

But all was now silent.

Having no time to linger, the outlaws soon galloped back to their station overlooking the plain, thinking it strange that the detachment of cavalry had not dashed up the river at the sound of the volleys that had been fired.

No sooner had the bandits left the camp than Carl said quickly:

"Bear up, my darling, and I will save you from these demons in human form. Cling to this root, and I will bring a log. We will float down until we can surmount the bank. Try and keep my revolver above water. Do not feel concerned. You are perfectly safe, and I will rejoin you in a moment."

"I will try, Carl; but, what a day and night of horror it has been! I fear I cannot survive so much grief and misery."

"Indeed, I know I should soon have died, had you not come to my rescue."

"Do not worry any more. It is useless, besides, we must not talk. There is danger in the very air we breathe."

While he spoke, Carl removed his revolvers and gave them to Dora, who was now resting on the projecting root of a tree. In five minutes more he rejoined her with two huge logs, which he had fastened together, forming a raft.

Without a word he placed Dora upon them, and swam by the side, one hand guiding the little raft. Soon they reached a point where they climbed the bank without difficulty.

In another quarter of an hour they were by the side of Carl's horse.

The young scout buckled his revolvers about his waist, sprung into the saddle, and leaning over, drew Dora up before him. At that moment an unearthly shriek sounded from down the river.

Francisco Gonzales was now suffering a fraction of the torture he had inflicted upon others; but it was not probable that he would be discovered by any of his comrades, for the reason that they were on the border of the timber, watching for the appearance of the detachment of cavalry, which Cortina had planned to annihilate by a series of ambushes.

"Dora," said the young man, "we will now make a dash for liberty. Do not burden your mind with thoughts of the past, but remember that you are now the only hope of your father and mother—yes, and of myself."

"Trust to me and all will be as well as the nature of things will allow."

Carl urged his horse through the timber, directly to the south plain, and then shot forward along the border toward the east trail and the cavalry camp.

In a very short time he reached the ford, crossed the river, was challenged by a sentinel, and then met and welcomed by Major Humphries himself. The men were all standing fully equipped except the guard and vedettes, all ready for action.

"In the name of wonder, Carl Clayton, where have you been; and what means the shooting up-river? You left us in a tight box. We are not acquainted with this section of country."

"By the way, whom have we here? Pardon me, miss,"—saluting Dora, who had raised herself partially. "I have been not a little mystified by the sounds of fire-arms, and the absence of all signs of the enemy of the plain."

"Major," said Carl, "allow me to introduce Miss Dean, daughter of Colonel Dean, and sister of my pard, Dick. Not a very fitting place for an introduction, neither is Miss Dean in a condition for conversation."

The major politely acknowledged the introduction.

Then Carl continued:

"The bandits killed Dick and captured his sister. I have just rescued her. We have been in the river, and the young lady must have blankets and sit by the fire."

"She has suffered enough to kill almost any one. I have no time to explain further; I can only say that the men you sent out will never return."

At this moment a shriek from Francisco Gonzales pierced the night-air.

"I will correct myself, major," Carl added; "one of your men will soon be here. He comes by the river."

Major Humphries turned pale at the fearful shriek, and the significant words of Carl.

The latter left him on the bank of the river gazing up the stream in wonder and expectancy.

The shriek of the bandit was most unearthly. None who heard it would ever forget it.

The young scout lowered Dora gently from the saddle, and placed her by the sheltered fire in a dry "wash-out." Then springing back, he procured blankets, some of which he wrapped about her, and spread others upon the ground for her to recline upon.

Thus leaving her, safe and comfortable, he bade the cook furnish her with coffee and food, saying, as he was about to go:

"Try and keep your mind composed. I have much that I must attend to. Do not fear—I will soon rejoin you. You must take some food, for you need strength."

"Do not stay long, Carl! I cannot overcome my terror when I am left alone."

Again that horrible shriek shot through the night air, this time sounding quite near the camp. Carl bounded out from the "wash-out."

The major strode from the river, and met him.

"In Heaven's name," exclaimed the officer, "what does that mean? Can it be some one in mortal agony? You do not mean to tell me it is one of my men?"

"Major," Carl returned, "please order your company to mount and spur forward to the bank of the river. I'll then explain everything."

Soon the cavalry, with jingling sabers, were formed in two lines on the bank of the Nueces, overlooking the stream.

At the same time, into the clear waters of the ford, from the dark shades, shot the log raft, with its strange freight—a living and a dead human being!

"Soldiers!" cried out Chaparral Carl, in an impressive voice, "every one of your comrades who were sent out to ascertain the position of the enemy, have been lassoed by the fiendish followers of Cortina, bound, blindfolded, and shot! You know now the meaning of those volleys."

A vengeful yell from the men was followed by an ejaculation of horror, as they recognized one of their comrades, lying still and silent on the raft.

Carl ran down the bank, and wading into the river, drew the raft on shore; and again came that fearful cry from the ashen lips of Francisco Gonzales, who felt that his doom was sealed.

"Soldiers!" continued the young scout, as he drew the logs further up the bank, to prevent them from floating; "here is one of your comrades, or at least, his corpse!"

"With it has floated the murderous miscreant who stabbed to death, yesterday, poor Dick Dean, and abducted his sister, whom you have seen me bring into camp. Now comes the moment of retribution for this inhuman fiend."

"I swore that I would avenge Dick, and I will keep my oath. You can remove your dead comrade from the raft. I claim my victim and my revenge."

"Come, dastard, assassin! If you know a prayer, say it; although I do not believe, if you were to pray a thousand years, it would remove the stain of your crimes from your soul. Come!"

Carl slashed the rope that bound the bandit to the raft with his bowie, clutched the wretch by the belt, and flung him up the bank.

No mercy was there in the young Texan's face at that moment. Just the opposite; for a thirst for revenge was manifested in every look and act—a thirst that could only be assuaged by the death of Gonzales.

At a low order from the major, the dead soldier was brought from the raft by four of his comrades, and tenderly wrapped in a blanket by his mute and sorrowing friends.

Chaparral Carl's movements were rapid. His preparations were quickly made.

Procuring a lasso, he adjusted the noose about the neck of the bandit, who now filled the air with his howls of terror. But not long had he the power to utter sound of any kind.

Carl cast the slack of the lasso over the limb of a tree, and jerked the bandit to his feet with one hand, pulling the rope taut with the other.

This done, he slashed the cords apart that bound the Greaser's wrists together, much to the surprise of all. Then the young scout stepped backward, and, by a vigorous effort, jerked the doomed wretch free from the earth!

The bandit whirled, and caught frantically at the rope with his benumbed hands.

Carl made fast the slack to the trunk of the tree.

The struggling miscreant succeeded in clutching the rope above his head and drawing himself up, partly freeing his throat from the awful pressure of the noose. This slackened, and then he whirled, his face too horrible and revolting for mortal to look upon.

Then it was that Carl whipped out one of his revolvers, cocked it, and brought it to bear.

A sounding report followed, and the bandit fell—one of his hands shattered by the bullet.

Reaching up with the one that remained unbroken, the wretch caught the rope again; his face black, and his eyes protruding from their sockets.

Again did he partially relieve himself from the pressure of the deadly noose, sustaining himself with one arm by a spasmodic effort, his muscles strained to the utmost.

The sight was horrible!

Again the revolver of Chaparral Carl "spoke," and down with great force fell the bandit, both hands now shattered and useless.

Thus he hung, fumbling wildly with his wounded hands, from which the blood ran in streams, at the rope.

This was but for a few seconds.

Then his arms fell limp, his legs drew up and straightened, his form quivered, his starting eyes grew dim; and, after intervals of twitching of the muscles, all became still.

Francisco Gonzales had gone to answer for his many crimes.

Daring Dick was avenged!

CHAPTER XVI.

STILL THEY COME.

AFTER Chaparral Carl had galloped past the veranda of Dean's Ranch, and down the natural avenue, on his mission of rescue, Colonel Dean and his bereaved wife became yet more agonized in mind—more prostrated with hopeless despair.

Some of the negroes had been dispatched to the nearest neighbors with the sad intelligence; but the rancheros were now too anxious in regard to their own homes, to be willing to leave them.

Besides, what could they do?

Dick was dead, and could not be brought to life again.

Dora was a captive, and no force, such as they could bring, would be sufficient to rescue her.

An intimate friend of poor Dick's who resided near, however, at once repaired to the ranch, and induced the colonel and Mrs. Dean to take some rest.

Later on, as the news spread to Oakville, as many men as could be spared galloped to Dean's Ranch, led by the gallant and noted Texan ranger, Captain Littleton. The latter was amazed at the presence of Cortina on the Nueces, having supposed the Chaparral Cock and his band to be in Mexico.

Captain Littleton was a host in himself, and instilled confidence in the score of rancheros he had collected. This was fortunate, as he had none of his own brave boys with him.

The captain was more than six feet in height, and splendidly proportioned; agile, and of fine physique, with a handsome and winning countenance, and was the hero of many a desperate encounter with the bandits of the Bravo.

It was sunset before Captain Littleton and his rancheros, all armed to the teeth, reached Dean's Ranch; and by that time, the old colonel had become changed from a hopeless and despairing man, to a desperate and determined avenger.

The body of poor Dick lay stretched upon a bench, prepared for burial, when the rancheros rode up. Dismounting, they viewed the remains, all swearing vengeance.

As they were thus engaged, Colonel Dean rode up from the corrals, fully equipped for the trail. He was greeted with words of sympathy and hope, all being eager for the start. The particulars of the dread occurrence were quickly told, and in five minutes, Captain Littleton and Colonel Dean galloped down the avenue, followed by a score of rancheros.

By the time that this party reached the margin of the mesquites, keeping within the same, it was moonlight, there being but a rosy tinge in the western sky, indicating that it was just past sunset.

All sat their horses in a line, within the margin of the mesquites, and gazed silently over the moonlit plain—the hundreds of carcasses of the butchered beeves being plainly seen, scattered, as they were, over the prairie, westward.

The colonel was in favor of dashing over the plain at once, in search of the bandit and his daughter, and it was only by most earnest pleading and reasoning, that the ranger captain prevailed upon the old man to maintain his position, and not risk his life for naught.

It was while this party of sworn avengers were thus positioned, that they discovered, directly across the plain from their stand, the half-dozen cavalrymen gallop out from the timber of the Nueces, and up the same for some distance, some dashing far ahead, while others lingered to inspect the woods at intervals.

Had it not been for the glint of the moonlight upon the flying saber scabbards, and other metal accoutrements, the character of these horsemen would have been unknown to the watchers; but this proved them United States soldiers, and the rancheros congratulated themselves upon having now some help in their proposed attack on the bandits.

The watchers were obliged to shade their eyes from the moon, to even detect the outlines of the cavalrymen, as they dashed up the river, the soldiers increasing the distance between them and the concealed Texans; but Captain Littleton was provided with a powerful night glass, and reported to his comrades the exact movements of the military scouts.

When the unfortunate soldiers were passed by the bandits, at different points, as the former rode along the edge of the timber, the Mexicans, in some cases, dashing from cover, upon their mustangs, for the purpose; then, as Captain Littleton reported, all became convinced that the number of the marauding force had not been exaggerated—the boldness of the dastard deeds, explained by the captain, proving this.

Captain Littleton felt, too, that Cortina had no intention of leaving the Nueces, until he had struck other blows. The outlaw chief had posted his men at different points, in order that the whole command could not be attacked at one time. The cunning Chaparral Cock had some outrageous project in his villainous mind, which he would make a desperate effort to carry out, before turning toward the Rio Grande.

To quiet, and render hopeful the old ranchero, the captain explained that he believed Cortina would make a dash, out on the plain, and defy the detachment of cavalry; challenge them by his movements of battle, and, with but a small portion of his command; leaving others to charge upon the rear of the soldiers, while he engaged them in front.

That some such plan was in the mind of the bandit chief, Littleton felt assured; and he reasoned, that but a few men, perhaps but one or two, would be left in each camp, in one of which Dora must be; and, in the event of a fight, the colonel could gallop, with two of the rancheros, to the camp—their location being now known—and rescue Dora, shooting down those who were detailed to guard her, before they could do her injury, by a stealthy advance in the timber, followed by a headlong charge into the camp.

These plausible reasonings served to quiet Colonel Dean; but, as the captain ended his explanations, the report of the Mexican rifles rung in the Nueces timber, again and again.

"Great God!"

This exclamation burst from the lips of Littleton.

"By Heavens!" he exclaimed, after a moment's pause, "the fight has commenced. Come on, gentlemen! This may be our only chance to rescue Miss Dora."

But the next instant the captain had reconsidered.

"Hold!" he said; "wait, until I try to explain those volleys. The troops are encamped, directly across from us. They have not, as yet, caught a glimpse of a Greaser, except those who were sent out to reconnoiter; and they have taken their last look at a Mexican, and at the world!"

"Gentlemen! I tell you that every soldier you saw spur up the river, is now a mutilated corpse."

"They have all been lassoed, bound, blindfolded, placed upon their knees, and shot in the back. Every volley you heard signaled the death of a couple of cavalrymen, without the slightest doubt!"

Furious ejaculations followed this explanation, from every ranchero; all grating their teeth, and instinctively clutching carbines, insanely anxious to charge headlong toward the Rio Nueces, and vengeance.

But the sober second thought of Captain Littleton bad its weight, and they kept their position, ready, however, to drive spurs home, and dash forward the very instant the ranger gave the order.

"If we only knew the number of the force of cavalry, we could form some idea as to our prospects for avenging the outrages and crimes of that execrable miscreant," said the captain, speaking in a meditative tone, more to himself.

than to the others; he not dreaming that any one had the means of knowing anything in regard to them.

"That information I neglected to give you," returned the colonel. "Carl knew that Cortina had come this way, and he guided the detachment on the trail, from Ringold Barracks. There are forty men, under Major Humphries, a brave and gallant soldier, and a true gentleman."

"Good! That leaves thirty-four remaining, after the murderous, cowardly executions. The major showed little knowledge of the bandit chief and his men. However, in sending out his boys to reconnoiter, he did for the best; but they are evidently fresh on the Rio Grande!

"They would have kept some distance from the timber, had they known the Greasers as well as my boys do. I reckon, if we can get the cowardly cut-throats out on the plain, in anything like fair fight, we can, with the help of the cavalry, wipe the majority of them from the face of the earth."

As if the words of Captain Littleton had been heard on the Nueces, and had been interpreted by the bandits, as a challenge; out into the moonlit plain, from the dark shades, dashed a score of swarthy Greasers in full view of the Texans.

And in the lead, mounted on his magnificent horse, was Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WORK GOES ON.

STRAIGHT out from the timber of the Rio Nueces, galloped Cortina, followed by a detachment of his men, mounted upon half-wild and fiery mustangs, that tossed their heads, and spurred the prairie sod proudly and impatiently, under loose rein; champing the cruel Spanish bits, which, on the slightest twitch, would cause torture to their jaws, and force them to halt on the instant.

Thus mounted, on dashed the dusky detachment of bandits, each resting his *escopeta* in the hollow of his left arm; grasping the small of the breech in his right hand, while the reins were in his left. Their keen black eyes swept the plain, their long, coarse hair flying with the motion of their mustangs, and the wind created by their speed.

Unconcerned and stoical, galloped Cortina, in advance of his yellow-skinned body-guard; a model of manly and equestrian beauty. None would dream, to thus behold him, that beneath that calm exterior, boiled a perfect volcano of merciless hate against the Texans, the *demonio Americanos*, who had wrested the fair Lone Star State, and the lands of gold on the Pacific, from his country—stolen Texas, which was his birth-place, and where his mother yet lived, from Mexico, besides bathing the fair land of Montezuma in the blood of her sons.

For this, as Cortina often asserted, he detested all Americans, and lived only for revenge; but, as there were fifteen indictments against him for murder, on either side of the Rio Grande, before he became a bandit, his assumed patriotism, and asserted object, do not appear to have any great foundation.

His last crime, previous to his outlawry, was to shoot the sheriff of Brownsville through the heart, when that officer attempted to arrest him for a murder which had been committed a week previous.

But we digress.

Out upon the plain galloped the Scourge of the Rio Grande, and his chosen few; and, when a half mile from it, they jerked their steeds to a halt simultaneously.

It was a grand sight, an exhibition of skillful horsemanship rarely witnessed; indeed, in no part of the world except in Mexico, where, in racing, the animals are trained to halt when at terrific speed, when the lariat, which is stretched across the track at the end of the course is reached; the nearness to this rope when the halt is made, being considered as much as the speed of the animal—the start, also, being made at a lariat stretched along the earth.

These races are very popular everywhere in Mexico.

When the bandits halted at a gesture from Cortina, they wheeled, fronting eastward, toward the cavalry camp; and, at another gesture, all gave out a taunting yell of defiance and derision.

"Gentlemen," said Captain Littleton, quickly and decidedly, as he viewed this scene, and heard the loud yells of the bandits; "there's going to be a big circus on this prairie to-night, you can bet your lives!"

"Cortina is chock-full of 'fight,' and believes he can clean out all who can be brought against him. This act of his proves it."

"Oh, if I but knew where my child is!" spoke Colonel Dean, more to himself than to the others.

"I can inform you, and positively, where your daughter is," put in the captain.

"Then, for Heaven's sake, and in the name of justice and humanity, do so! You surely do not enjoy my torture?"

"I will do so, colonel," returned the old ranger, in a quiet tone. "Not until this instant

has it flashed upon my mind. Miss Dora was taken at once to the camp of his chief, by the bandit who abducted her. That is quite evident; consequently, she is just within the timber, at the point where Cortina and his cut-throat followers galloped out upon the plain.

"As soon as we charge, and get near the spot, do you gallop immediately thither, revolver in hand, shoot down the guard, and carrying her off, avoiding the scene of the fight."

"Thank you, captain! You must be right. When I have rescued my daughter, you shall see that I have not forgotten the old days in the army. I can still send my bullets where I want them."

"All right, colonel! Depend upon it, I'll do my part in avenging the abduction of Dora, and the slaying of her poor brother."

All the attention of the rancheros was now centered upon the timber, directly opposite them; all expecting to see the detachment of cavalry dash out, and charge toward the bandits.

In the camp, the appearance of the outlaws, and the challenging yell, had been expected. Chaparral Carl had foretold this movement on their part.

The corpse of the soldier, which had floated down the river with Francisco Gonzales, had been buried by his comrades. Dora Dean had dried her garments by the camp-fire, Carl doing all in his power for her comfort, as well as did the major, and the surgeon of the company to which the detachment belonged.

Every preparation had been made for a desperate conflict with the bandits. Major Humphries knew that, if he succeeded in capturing, or killing the noted bandit chief, it would be several "feathers in his hat," or, in other words, would place him in a favorable position for promotion, and cause him to receive high praise from the Government, publicly expressed.

Consequently, the major was eager to engage with the outlaws; although the latter were two to one against him. Carl, too, was resolved to lead the van in the coming fight; but he was puzzled in regard to Dora. Where should he leave her?

Would she be safe if secreted in a thicket?

Would she consent to being thus left?

The position of the poor girl was indeed, terrible.

But Chaparral Carl was possessed of a will power, sufficient to bring his sense of the living and the dead—or what he considered such—to the front, and to bear in mind their outrageous wrongs.

These must be avenged.

A consciousness, that his and Daring Dick's past services against Cortina had caused the latter to make this raid of vengeance upon Colonel Dean, so filled the young scout with fury that he would have preferred death to being compelled to linger behind in the coming fight.

The major was consulted, and both men now reasoned with Dora, who begged and prayed Carl not to leave her. Finally, however, the poor terrified maiden consented to remain secreted in a thicket near the camp of a soldier, who, being ill, was ordered by the major to remain with, and guard her, at the cost of his life. These arrangements having been perfected, the bugle sounded "boots and saddles," and, by twos the detachment of cavalry, thirty-three strong, trotted from the camp, through the timber.

Thus they started, leaving Dora and the sick soldier hidden as described; and the hideous corpse of Francisco Gonzales still swaying, a sight horrible to behold.

No sooner had the cavalry cleared the timber, than another taunting yell shot over the plain, from Cortina's body-guard; all sitting motionless on their mustangs, as when they first halted.

The major formed his men in two lines, with ample room between each for full play of sabers, should it come to close quarters. There they were, thirty-five Americans in all, armed to the teeth, well disciplined and well mounted, fitted for endurance.

Eighteen bandits only, not counting their chief.

Was Cortina mad?

Had he lost all judgment?

Surely the outlaw chief and his men were doomed.

Thus thought the soldiers.

"Don't imagine you've got a soft thing boys," said Carl; "you'll see more actors on the scene before we reach rifle range of them. Keep an eye on our back trail, major, and be ready to order the rear column to the right about, or they'll be shot in the back. I understand their tactics."

"Thanks, Carl!" yelled Major Humphries.

The bugle sounded the charge, and spurs were driven home. On, over the bright moonlit plain—on, crushing flowers and grass into the sod—galloped the cavalry; neck and neck, in orderly array.

On, in that thundering charge until half the distance was passed, that had intervened between them and the bandits at the start. Then, out from the timber of the Rio Nueces, to their left and rear, shot nearly a score more of outlaws,

So intent were the cavalry gazing at those ahead, that not one, except the keen eyed Carl Clayton, detected the miscreants in the rear. He at once gave a piercing yell.

Instantly the rear column was ordered to halt, and face the new-comers, Carl taking command; the major, with the first column, galloping on toward Cortina. Hardly was this change made, when the bandits, who had spurred from the bottom, gave a wild yell, and ten more of their comrades plunged from the timber, out upon the plain, from a point beyond that of the first; these dashing far out on the plain, in the direction of the Rio Frio, and circling, as if intending to join Cortina. At the same moment, the rancheros under Captain Littleton were discovered, coming at headlong speed from the line of mesquites to join in the unequal contest.

The moonlit prairie now presented a grand and warlike spectacle. Cortina had formed his ranks well.

He had not counted, however, upon any Texans joining in the fray.

All attention was now centered upon each other.

Mexican and American, each with an insane longing for blood, came dashing toward each other; none, however, seeing another party of horsemen, away to the eastward, beyond the point where the cavalry had encamped.

These shot from the timber, over the plain, to the north.

They, also, were swarthy, serpent-eyed low-browed ruffians, followers of Juan N. Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande.

Their character was easily read.

Their object was obvious.

They were speeding straight, in the direction of Dean's Ranch!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WAR OF DEVASTATION.

It was plainly evident to Major Humphries and Chaparral Carl, if not to those in their command, that Cortina had been confident the cavalry would engage him, and had formed a plot to annihilate them to a man; which plot had been remarkably well arranged.

It was also evident that the bandit chief knew well that he would lose a large number of his followers; and why he thus risked so much, instead of at once retreating toward the Rio Grande, was a mystery to all. Had they, however, seen the ten mounted outlaws speeding toward Dean's Ranch, they would have known his object in thus delaying.

Before the cavalry had gotten within rifle-shot of Cortina, the latter and his body-guard whirled their mustangs, and sped toward the Frio; and, at the same moment, the ten bandits, who had last shot out of the timber, galloped past the rear of the detachment under the major, within range, and delivered a galling fire, emptying two saddles, and wounding three soldiers.

This was so unexpected, and caused such confusion, that, before Major Humphries could rally his men in orderly array, the bandits were beyond range, toward the Nueces; their mustangs skimming the plain.

Immediately he ordered a headlong charge after Cortina; determined, if possible, to capture the noted outlaw.

Meanwhile Chaparral Carl had led the rear column of the cavalry in the charge upon the score of bandits that had first appeared upon the plain; but they whirled their mustangs, and sped toward the timber whence they had come. Carl had, however, given the order to fire, and five of the Greasers threw up their arms, and with yells of agony sunk back, and to the earth as the mustangs dashed frantically, with wild snorts, into the undergrowth.

Realizing that it was useless to follow them, Carl ordered his men out over the plain again.

There, an exciting scene met his view.

Cortina had not supposed that he would have others than the cavalry to contend against; but he found that he had been mistaken. He soon perceived the rancheros, under Captain Littleton coming down upon him.

Well did the bandit chief know that the animals of the Texans were as quick of movement as his own, and would break after him in the timber, his intended refuge when too hard pressed. Not only this, but he knew that the rancheros would, with their deadly rifles, plant every bullet to count, and fight every man for himself.

No longer could he hope to annihilate the cavalry, and he was, besides, in great peril, and liable to lose half or more of his command.

With a loud yell, he wheeled, and sped westward a sufficient distance to avoid the detachment of Humphries. Then he turned toward the Nueces, to take refuge in the timber; but Chaparral Carl had anticipated this movement, and now led his men in a headlong charge to cut him off.

Then, when too late—for the Texans were in his rear, and the cavalry quartering toward him—the king of the outlaws saw his mistake.

He ought to have kept on to the westward, running the chances of being overtaken by the rancheros, who were mounted upon fresh horses. The bandits, who had retreated to cover, in the timber, to escape Carl's detach-

ment, saw the peril of their leader; and both parties united, and dashed to the rescue, in the rear of the cavalry under Carl.

The outlaws numbered twenty-five, and the young scout had but seventeen men. His party were thus placed in a position of great danger. He was warned, however, just in time; and Major Humphries turned his men to the assistance of their comrades, Carl ordering a "right-about," facing his foes. Thus Cortina was left to the infuriated rancheros.

This sudden maneuver threw the bandits into confusion; especially when they saw their chief and his guard, plunging into the timber, with the Texans in hot pursuit, their rifles ringing, and their wild yells cutting the air.

Carl had, at once, quartered toward the timber, and before the bandits realized their position and peril, they were between the two detachments of cavalry, and the fearful carnage had begun.

The outlaws now became a demoralized mob, and spurred madly west, delivering an irregular and scattering fire from their *escopetas*, striving to get beyond the cavalry under Chaparral Carl, and to take refuge in the timber. But the young Texan ordered a revolver charge; the boys in blue slinging their carbines, driving deep their spurs, and thundering down upon the thinned ranks of the bandits at terrific speed.

The scene that followed was a terrible one.

The cavalry succeeded in getting to within revolver range, on account of the bandits being at a disadvantage in the race, as they were on a quartering course toward the timber, being forced over more ground. At a yell from Carl, a continuous fusilade poured bullets into the bandits like a shower of hail.

It was no fight. It was simply a massacre.

Not one of the outlaws reached the timber; all falling, either dead or desperately wounded before that hurtling shower of lead. Many of the mustangs, too, were shot; the unhurt beasts stampeding, with snorts of frantic terror, in every direction.

Meanwhile, the Texan rifles and revolvers sounded from up the river; and Major Humphries, with his little command, galloped in that direction.

Carl, with his boys in blue—now only eight in number, nine having been struck by ounce balls from the *escopetas* of the Greasers, and now receiving the attention of the surgeon, who had followed close after them—still dashed ahead.

Before either he or the major, could reach the camp of Cortina, to which the bandit chief had dashed with his body-guard, all firing had ceased; and when the cavalry galloped into the camp, passing dead outlaws and riderless mustangs on their way, the rancheros, powder-grimed and panting, were reloading their weapons—many of them having sprung from their mustangs, in chase of the surviving bandits, who had been forced to abandon their animals, and swim the river.

After counting the slain of the body-guard, including a number that had been shot in the river, it was calculated that but five had escaped death; some of these, as the Texans asserted, being wounded.

As Cortina, whom both Texans and Mexicans believed, bore a charmed life, had, as usual, escaped—in what direction no one could tell—all search for him was useless. It was almost certain that the bandit chief had gone either up or down the river; as it was impossible for man or animal to surmount the opposite bank of the stream—the outlaws who had escaped having swam down the Nueces with the current.

Upon the appearance of Carl, Colonel Dean rushed to his side, an expression of anguish and agony upon his face that was torturing to witness.

"Lost!" he exclaimed: "Carl, she is lost! Dora, my darling, my only one, is not here! She is lost forever!"

"Oh, Heaven sustain me! Heaven guard and preserve my child from the miscreants of the Rio Grande!"

Carl Clayton grasped the colonel's hand, joy in every line of his face, and cried out:

"Dora is safe, Colonel Dean! I rescued her before the fight. She was secured to that big tree yonder, and is now secreted in a thicket near the cavalry camp, with a soldier to guard her. Yes, thank Heaven, your daughter is safe from the fiends of the Bravo!"

The old colonel trembled, as does an aspen-leaf at the touch of human hand—trembling with the intensity of his joy, relief, and thanks.

He strove to speak his gratitude, to utter his soul-felt thanks; but he could not articulate.

Naught but a gurgling, gasping sound issued from the old ranchero's throat; but such joy was stamped upon his face, that it hushed the oaths and ejaculations of triumph, that had been bursting, boisterously from the lips of the rough rancheros.

At this moment a piercing yell sounded from the margin of the timber, in the direction of the plain—a yell of alarm, or warning—and all sprung into their saddles, galloping up the natural lane; all filled with wonder and curi-

osity, speculating as to what had, or what was about to occur, to render the night more eventful than it had thus far been.

Both cavalry and rancheros, as they cleared the timber, discovered the regimental surgeon running toward them, and gesticulating wildly, at the same time, toward the northeast.

Both Carl and the colonel uttered, involuntarily, groans of apprehensive anguish.

They felt, intuitively, what it was to which the surgeon was pointing.

The rancheros gave vent to cries of the most vengeful fury.

The work was not yet done.

Beyond the mesquite belt and the oak openings on the margin of the bottom-timber of the Rio Frio, forked flames of fire shot up against the dark shades of the towering trees.

The whole sky was now filled with a lurid light.

Cortina had done all in his power to keep his oath of vengeance.

Dean's Ranch was in flames!

The rancheros spurred at terrific speed over the plains, the cavalry holding the field and conveying their wounded to the camp.

Bewildered and agonized, Chaparral Carl spurred toward the cavalry camp, in advance of all, to bear Dora homeward; although he knew that it was but a home in name—that it was fast being consumed by the devouring fiery element.

CHAPTER XIX.

BIG JIM.

AFTER the departure of Colonel Dean and the rancheros from the ranch, the stricken mother sat still and silent, her form bowed and her face resting upon the breast of her dead boy.

At times, when she would think of Dora, her pet, in her imagination seeing her beautiful daughter in the camp of the murderers of her son, the poor bereaved woman would shudder, her blood would chill in her veins, and she would shriek aloud.

Then, as she recalled the fact that she was leaning upon the corpse of her murdered boy, her head would again drop upon his breast, and she would seem for the time to be insensible to all that surrounded her.

Tears would again flow, and these, doubtless, kept her from becoming hopelessly insane.

Howls and moans came from the lips of the negroes.

The grown men among the slaves were stationed at different points around the ranch and cabins, rifles in hand, agreeably to the orders of Captain Littleton, to guard against any lurking bandits.

Carl's black steed, Racer, had been given in charge to a little negro boy, black as ebony, familiarly called "Persim"—short for Persimmon—and the latter, to make sure of the safety of the horse had led him into the timber, after the animal had satisfied both hunger and thirst, at a reasonable time after the long and rapid ride that Carl had been forced to maintain after leaving the cavalry detachment, when he had ascertained that the trails of the bandits all led to the vicinity of Dean's Ranch.

Thus, without change, was the position of affairs about the ranch, until the sounds of the distant conflict were plainly heard on the still night air; the clear moonlight, among the trees and foliage, giving a wild, weird effect to the impressive night-scene.

As the report of the rifles of the shooting-parties, all fired simultaneously when the soldiers were shot by Cortina, sounded on the night-air, Mrs. Dean sprung to her feet with a piercing cry. The poor woman feared that still greater misery and death were destined to overwhelm her; that she was soon to be left alone in the world, with all her loved ones dead.

It must be, she felt, that her husband and Carl would be slain and that Dora would be borne away by the bandits to Mexico and lost forever!

Back and forth before the corpse of her son, the suffering woman paced, wringing her hands and praying for mercy and protection for her loved ones yet remaining—praying for the safe return of her husband and Dora, and Chaparral Carl.

The negro women stood aside in hushed anguish at the sight of the great grief of their mistress.

As has been stated, the body of Daring Dick was upon a bench within the large open space in the middle of the dwelling, the apartments of the same being on either side of this open space.

Consequently, to the rear of the ranch towered the dark, moss-draped bottom-timber, somber and gloomy in the extreme; it was, indeed, funereal-like, requiring no great stretch of the imagination to people with murderous foes, bandits or Indians. The negroes often gazed in that direction with starting eyes, shuddering with superstitious terror and apprehension.

To the front stretched the open avenue, between the oaks, now brightly illuminated; and, although a weird scene enough, it was bright and cheering when compared with the view in the rear of the dwelling. Certain it was that

none of those on guard or the women with Mrs. Dean dreamed of danger from the oak openings.

The negroes on guard feared that the rancheros would be defeated and that the bandits would then gallop toward the ranch, and shoot them all down like so many dogs; and they, as if by common consent, sneaked one by one from their positions, to secrete themselves behind the trunks of the huge oaks, from which they could command a view down the entire length of the natural avenue.

This brought them all within speaking distance, and one of the number—Big Jim by name—a gigantic negro, who feared nothing, human or brute, but who was nevertheless extremely superstitious, now repudiated all this upon witnessing the fearful mental agony of his mistress.

Ashamed of the weakness that had previously ruled him, Big Jim resolved to stand his ground: to protect the ranch and defend its mistress to the death, should the bandits be victorious, and attack the home of his master.

He succeeded in instilling some of his own determined bravery and confidence into the minds of his fellow-slaves, and but a short time passed, after their promise to stand by Jim, when their resolution and firmness were put to the test, and that in a most startling and unexpected manner.

Unexpected, because the far-off reports of fire-arms still filled the air.

Big Jim had seated himself upon a bulging root of an immense oak on the border of the natural avenue, when a series of most demoniac yells from the south caused the burly black to bound to his feet.

His face turned ashen as he grasped his rifle, the other negroes gathering around him in their consternation.

Mrs. Dean and her attendants uttered shrieks of frantic terror and horror.

And well they might.

There was no mistaking the character of those who had uttered those blood-curdling yells.

Up the avenue at terrific speed, digging their long-roweled spurs into the flanks of their maddened mustangs at every bound, the beasts snorting with pain—on they dashed toward Dean's Ranch, a score of swarthy bandits!

They were the same who had been secreted east of the cavalry camp, and who had spurred across the plain to the Rio Frio without being discovered by those whose attention had been purposely drawn and held by Cortina and the different detachments of the outlaw command.

On flew the wild-eyed mustangs, all their power of action being brought to the front by the cruel spurs—on, bearing their fiendish riders on their errand of rapine and murder, to leave a smoldering trail of desolation and death, where death and anguish unspeakable already ruled!

The brutal marauders appeared most murderous, merciless and fiendish.

Their black and snaky eyes were filled with a thirst for revenge, their brutish and repulsive faces contorted with intense hate and vengeful fury, as they dashed nearer and nearer to the home that had already been bereaved and made desolate by one of their devilish number.

The onward dash up the avenue of his half-score of fiendish outlaws was simply terrific.

Big Jim and his fellow-slaves stood for a moment in their tracks, almost paralyzed with terror.

Unable for the time being to breathe, or to move a limb, they thus remained; then, with a fearful whoop, Big Jim sprang out into the middle of the avenue and yelled:

"Come out dar, yer or'nary niggers, an' pepper ther yaller skunks!"

At the same instant the gigantic negro leveled his rifle, took deliberate aim, and fired.

An unearthly shriek shot from the oncoming bandits, one of them tossing his arms in the air, and dropping his *escopeta* as he sunk to the earth.

This caused a momentary confusion, and a short halt, while terrible curses filled the air.

The other negroes, encouraged by the success of Jim, darted from behind the oaks and fired a volley down the avenue.

So excited were they, however, that their bullets flew wild, doing no execution; and, with derisive yells the bandits dashed madly on toward the ranch, leaving their dead comrade on the sward.

Big Jim and his party now rushed toward the dwelling, where, much to the relief of the former, he perceived two of the negro women dragging their mistress from the rear of the open space toward the timber, there to take refuge.

The burly slave gave a peculiar whoop, which he knew would warn the blacks in the cabins to fly to the thickets with their little ones, and hide themselves. This, they were not slow in doing.

He then, with his mates, sprung into the open space in the middle of the dwelling, beside the corpse of their young master, determined that they would guard the body of Dick, and defend the house to the death.

The rifles were all reloaded, and the negroes

stood in line; but only prevented at the last moment, from flying for their lives, he threatening to shoot the first one who retreated.

Hardly had the slaves thus prepared to meet the foe—all, except their burly leader, trembling from head to foot—when the yellow-skinned demons dashed up to the ranch uttering the most fiendish yells.

Both parties fired at the same instant, three negroes falling dead in their tracks, and but one of the bandits being slain. He fell by the hand of Big Jim; the other negroes being too terrified to take aim, and their bullets flying over the heads of the outlaws.

The two blacks, who had not been struck, bounded, with shrieks of abject terror, through the opening, and down into the dark shades of the bottom-timber.

Brave Big Jim was left alone.

The bandits, now eight in number, sprung from their mustangs, the ends of the neck-ropes of their animals secured about their wrists, and, leaping upon the veranda, rushed, with their long knives in their hands, within the wide space which divided the dwelling.

Big Jim, with clubbed rifle, his eyes glaring with panther-like desperation and fury, stood by the corpse of his young master, awaiting the onslaught of the yellow fiends, and his own certain death!

CHAPTER XX.

HOW CORTINA KEPT HIS OATH.

BIG JIM had revered his young master, and not only was he filled with a desperate determination to protect his lifeless remains, but with a wild longing for revenge as well.

He bore in mind that his beautiful young mistress was in the power of these miscreants, and his appearance, as these thoughts came upon him, was terrible.

The shooting of two of the outlaws had given him confidence, and he believed himself invincible, in his rage and great strength. The sight of the ebon giant made the bandits hesitate in their advance, and one of them reloaded his escopeta.

Jim detected the movement, and knew that he was doomed.

Forward he dashed, his rifle crushing the skull of one of his foes; but before the weapon could be raised, the blades of two of the Greasers, one on either side, slashed long gashes in his arms.

Back he sprang to the side of the corpse.

Up again went the rifle, blood spurting from both arms of the brave black. The bandits were appalled.

It was a sable Hercules at bay!

At that instant, the outlaw who had reloaded his weapon, sprung in front of Jim, and leveled it. The negro dropped like lightning to the floor.

The bullet passed over his form, as he thus crouched, and the corpse of Daring Dick.

The next moment, Big Jim, with rifle uplifted, made a panther-like bound, and with a sickening sound his rifle-barrel crushed the outlaw's skull; but at once the six Greasers were upon him, and their long knives piercing his vitals.

With a deep groan of agony, Big Jim fell upon the log floor. His work was done!

Then followed a horrible scene—an act that might possibly be committed by the Apaches of the Pecos. Two of the bandits ran a lariat through an iron ring, at the top of the open space before mentioned, and directly over the yet quivering body of the brave negro.

A noose was quickly tied and adjusted around the neck of the dead young Texan; then one of the miscreants hauled on the rope, while the other clutched the rigid body and raised it in the air, first pulling taut the rope, and securing it around the iron ring. With fiendish satisfaction they viewed this desecration of the dead, kicking the mutilated corpse of poor Jim, while they cast apprehensive glances down the avenue toward the plain, and the scene of conflict.

Just then, from the doors of the apartments on either end of the dwelling came a flashing light.

The other bandits had fired Dean's Ranch.

Out they rushed, from each side, into the open space, then to the veranda, when all vaulted into their saddles, their mustangs, terrified by the fire, and the scent of human blood, rearing and snorting furiously.

For a few seconds the bruyal bandits sat their steeds, giving vent to their exultation by yells, as they gazed at the swaying corpse of Daring Dick, and the gashed form of Big Jim, as well as the bodies of the other slaves. Then, with an oath, two of them dismounted, and dragged the remains of their comrades from the veranda, casting them across the horns of their saddles.

"Vamonos!" yelled one, as he drove spurs, and all galloped toward the cabins of the slaves.

Between these and the dwelling, was a huge stack of corn-fodder. This they fired, and then the negro-quarters; the inmates having escaped to the timber.

The fodder-stack, and the furniture of the ranch, burned quickly; but the logs were much slower in being consumed. The bandits, how-

ever, felt assured that the fiendish work had been well done; that the ranch and cabins were doomed. They, therefore, dashed at once through the oak openings, aiming to reach the camp of their chief, on the Rio Nueces; and dreaming not that their well-organized band had been nearly annihilated, and that their chief was fleeing for his life, with but five of his famous body-guard, and two of these wounded.

Fifteen minutes after the bandits galloped from Dean's Ranch, the colonel, with his party, and Captain Littleton in advance—all at headlong speed—rode into the opening; their horses covered with foam, and the eyes of the riders glaring with the most fearful apprehension.

Brightly illuminated by the roaring and circling flames, that formed a frame-work of fire around the open space in the dwelling, swayed the body of poor Dick Dean, hanging by the neck!

The sight of this swaying form was a mystery to all. It was evident that some one had been hanged by the bandits; and, of course, it must be a Texan. But, when they came within pistol-shot of the dwelling, they comprehended the dastardly act of the Mexicans; for, all recognized the corpse, thus hanging ignominiously, and surrounded by flames!

Colonel Dean gave vent to his horror by a most unearthly groan, and came near falling from his saddle. There hung the form of his murdered son, amid the flames of his burning home!

His wife was, perhaps, dead; his slaves, slain; nothing but desolation, destruction, and death were before him! It was no wonder that the old ranchero was plunged into the gloomiest depths of despair. His house was left unto him desolate.

But he rallied, notwithstanding.

His horse sprung far ahead of the others, but could not be forced near the burning house; and the colonel sprung to the ground, rushing madly toward his fast-disappearing home.

Once on the veranda, he sprung, knife in hand, beneath the burning roof; regardless of the warning cries of Captain Littleton and the others.

Springing forward, over the log floor of the open portion of the dwelling, from which curled little flames toward the fire-encompassed corpse of his son, the clothing of which was now curled and charred by the intense heat—on, the old ranchero went, disregarding the flames; unconscious of the heat, in his agony of soul, clasping the body, severing the lariat and rushing from the vortex of fire, his gray locks scorched, and his clothing already in flames!

One mad bound from the veranda, and Colonel Dean, with his dead son in his arms, fell prostrate upon the sward, his clothing in a blaze, which ready hands soon extinguished.

The old ranchero, however, when this danger was over, was found to be as devoid of sense and motion, as the body of Daring Dick. His hair, from below his sombrero had been burned, his face was blistered, and his hands as well. He appeared as much like a corpse as his son.

The rancheros braved the heat, that they might examine the human forms which lay upon the long floor; all expecting to see among them that of the colonel's wife. But the bodies of the slaves were easily identified. That of Big Jim was quite natural, his flesh being but little scorched.

The many wounds of the giant negro, and the pool of blood in which he lay, proved that he had fought nobly; and the trails of gore, caused by the bandits dragging out their slain, showed plainly that Big Jim had killed two of the enemy, while defending the corpse of his young master, besides having shot one in the avenue—a pool of blood, and the crushed flowers, being plain "sign" to indicate this to the practiced trailers of the party.

No time was now lost. A lasso was shot across the veranda, the noose falling over the feet of Big Jim, and by a dextrous twitch drawn around them. In this way the body of the brave negro was drawn out from the surrounding flames, and laid tenderly upon the sward. All were satisfied that Jim had acted in a self-sacrificing and heroic manner, in attempting to defend his master's house, and prevent the bandits from desecrating the corpse of poor Dick. Convinced of this, they were resolved that the faithful slave should have Christian burial.

The body of Mrs. Dean could not be found; but all feared that she had perished in one of the apartments, which were now a raging mass of flames.

The cabins were also each a raging furnace; but the stack of fodder was only a smoldering heap of ashes, having been quickly consumed.

The dazed and furious rancheros stood at a safe distance from the intense heat, and gazed at the terrible conflagration, which lighted up the dark timber in the rear, and shone upon the enameled surface of the oak leaves, turning the foliage to a sheeny and shining gold.

They had been but a little time thus, when the negro boy, "Persim," darted around the east corner of the burning dwelling, coming

from the timber, gave a cry of joy and then rushed back again. The rancheros gave utterance to a simultaneous yell of relief and pleasure.

They had believed all the negroes to be slain, but evidently some had escaped.

Two men ran quickly after little Persim, and soon returned, bearing the unconscious form of Mrs. Dean; followed by a crowd of moaning and terrified negroes, men, women, and children. The survivors were thus collected.

Mrs. Dean was laid beside her husband, and the male slaves were dispatched to the river with canteens for water; they still trembling with terror, and scarce able to speak.

Strange and impressive, grand and yet horrifying, was the scene at Dean's Ranch at this moment. The faces of all expressed various and strange emotions, and were now lit up by the still brilliant flames; every branch, and twig, and spear of grass, clearly outlined by the red light from the forked flames.

None present would ever to their dying day forget what then lay before them, or its author, Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grandel

Although he had been compelled to pay dearly for it, the Chaparral Cock had kept his oath of vengeance as fully as it had been in his power to do it.

CHAPTER XXI.

LYING IN WAIT.

WHEN Cortina, at the head of his body-guard, galloped madly toward the lane which led to his camp—where Dora Dean had been secured—the king of the outlaws realized that his followers were mostly doomed; that the unexpected advent of the rancheros had defeated him, and foiled his plans. He regretted now, with one exception, the division of his forces that he had made.

That exception was the ten men whom he had ordered to secrete themselves beyond the trail, where the cavalry had encamped. His keen gaze had discovered that these men had dashed across the plain toward the Rio Frio; and he felt confident that they would obey his orders and fire Dean's Ranch.

The most aggravating discovery that the bandit chief had made was that of Dora's rescue, and Chaparral Carl's escape from his vengeance.

He swore mentally that the young Texan scout should yet fall a victim to his vengeance.

It was plain to him that the rifles of the rancheros would decimate his body-guard; indeed, the bullets of the Texans were causing his men to fall as he neared the timber. They would dash in hot pursuit, even to the riverbank; and it was simply suicide to make a stand against them. Cortina's own life, he felt, was in peril; and his whole aim, now, must be to escape.

The outlaw chief now dashed forward on his magnificent horse, far ahead of his guard and down into his deserted camp, when he turned his horse into the undergrowth and sped down the Nueces, eastward—the reports of the *escopetas* of his guard sounding in his rear.

Thus dashed Cortina, aiming to gain the position which had been occupied by his ten followers, who had gone on their vengeful errand to Dean's Ranch.

If he could signal them as they appeared from out the belt of mesquites, they could, without doubt, rejoin him safely if he could gain his old position.

Did they point due south from the ranch, they all would certainly be slain. Could they but join him, all would then speed toward the Rio Grande. To-morrow this would be too late.

The rancheros would rally by that time, and would render his escape an impossibility.

The disappearance of his captive was most mysterious.

Where, too, was Francisco Gonzales? And where was the corpse of the cavalryman?

Cortina could not account for the strange disappearances; but he was not to be left long in ignorance in regard to the whereabouts of the two who had vanished, for he was now near the cavalry camp.

There he saw the body of Gonzales, his most trusted scout and spy, hanging from a limb before him—a horrible and repulsive sight!

The bandit chief gritted his teeth, his eyes flashing in his furious rage.

His eyes swept the camp with keen search.

But few camp "tricks" were to be seen.

Had a guard been posted there?

Might there not be some soldier even now glancing across his carbine-sights, and aiming at his heart or brain?

This was not improbable, but Cortina did not halt. He drew a revolver, and proceeded across the camp, discovering the smoldering fire in the "wash-out," at which Dora had dried her garments.

Here the outlaw leader paused, and listened intently.

All firing had ceased up the river, but wild yells were plainly heard, coming from Texan throats, as the listener well knew.

Cortina suddenly started in his saddle.

He had, for the moment, forgotten the object which had brought him down the river, in place of speeding toward the Rio Grande and safety.

But he was suddenly reminded of this object by the insane yells of the rancheros.

This could only mean that Dean's Ranch had been fired, as he had ordered. Cortina decided that his men must have been successful.

To ascertain that this was really the case, the king of the bandits rode rapidly toward the plain, and some distance from the cart-trail.

Truly, it seemed that all the fiends favored him.

Verily, a day and night of vengeance had come upon all who bore the name of Dean.

Cortina's horse crashed directly into a dense thicket that barred its way.

All at once a shriek of mortal terror sounded from female lips, a vengeful curse from the throat of a man; and the glitter of an arrow of moonlight, upon the barrel of a carbine, caught the keen eye of the celebrated outlaw.

Like a flash, Cortina thrust out his revolver, the weapon instantly vomiting fire and lead; when there followed an unearthly yell of agony, and the sick cavalryman, who had been left to guard Dora Dean, sunk lifeless—the hoofs of the horse of the bandit chief, as it dashed along, crushing the bones of the dying soldier!

The rifle of the slain man exploded, as the clutch of its owner tightened about the trigger; the bullet whistling dangerously near the head of Cortina, and causing his horse to rear almost perpendicular upon its hind legs.

Poor Dora, who, wrapped in blankets, had been in a heavy slumber, born of great mental and physical prostration, when awakened by her guard, so soon to lie a crushed corpse before her—the soldier realizing, when too late, that the bandit leader was galloping directly toward the thicket—sprung to her feet, in the very extreme of terror and despair.

She had been writhing and groaning, while asleep; being racked by fearful dreams.

In those dreams, she had again been taken by the merciless outlaws of the Bravo, and borne from her bereaved parents, her home, her murdered brother, and her beloved Carl.

Now, that dream was to prove a reality; for she recognized the horseman before her, who had just slain her protector, and forced his steed upon the dying soldier, crushing the latter almost beyond recognition beneath its hoofs.

It was he, the Scourge of the Rio Grande!

Incapable of speech or motion, the beautiful girl stood, her eyes fixed, in a terrified stare, on the Apollo-like man before her. He sat his prancing, affrighted horse, an icy glitter in his eye; his face, cold and expressionless as marble.

Suddenly Cortina drove spurs to his horse, bounding directly to the side of Dora, who was chained to the earth; her colorless lips parted, her pearly teeth exposed, and a wild lock of terror on her face.

With a rapid movement, the bandit chief reached downward, casting the bridle reins over the horn of his saddle, and grasping Dora, jerked her quickly into his arms, as the steed dashed madly on through the undergrowth. Captured again!

Dora Dean gave one low gasping outcry; and then, mercifully, her senses left her, and she lay, limp and corpse-like, across the hollow of the left arm of the outlaw chief. The latter clutched the reins instantly, and guided the animal toward the edge of the timber, to the northward.

Soon he reached the border of the undergrowth, halting just within the same. It screened him and his horse from the view of any who might be on the prairie.

Then a sight burst upon the outlaw's view, which caused him to smile and mutter with exultation and satisfaction:

"Cortina, el Ranchero, knows how to burl destruction and death upon those who would balk his plans, and betray him to an ignominious death, he muttered between his grating teeth.

"Though they may ranch it far from the Bravo, they find out that I have a long arm."

"Caramba! They have slain my men, but there are plenty more in my mountain camps, beyond the Rio Grande. What are the lives of a few ladrones, and cringing peons, when lost to further my ends?"

"My vengeance is almost satisfied. The home of Colonel Dean burns before my eyes. His son, the scout, who has more than once nearly caused my capture, has paid the penalty of death. The daughter, although she mysteriously escaped, has again, as mysteriously, fallen into my power. It was all to be so."

"The Fates favor my efforts at revenge. It is not my wish to slay the old colonel and his wife. They must live, and suffer—live through their declining years, without son or daughter to comfort them, to sympathize with them, and cater to their childish ills and wants."

"When Chaparral Carl is in my power, then Juan Cortina can say that he has kept his oath of vengeance, to the letter."

"Caramba! How these Texans fly! They

would cut their way through a thousand men this moment.

"The sight of that burning ranch has doubled their fury. They are demons in a fight, and had they not come up when they did, not a cavalryman would be alive at this moment."

"Ha! ha! ha!" A cold, fiendish, unearthly laugh.

"Major Humphries, bury your dead, for the wolves and buzzards have been well provided for by Cortina."

"The cattle of the colonel strew the plain. Do what you will. Saw off the legs and arms, and, in your boasted honorable warfare, plunge your knives into the breasts of my wounded men; or hang them like dogs when they suffer the tortures of your bullets and knives, as you did with Francisco Goozales."

"It could have been none other than Chaparral Carl, that brought my trusted spy to the cavalry camp, released the girl and carried away with him the corpse of that soldier."

This, the bandit chief said, as though the idea had but just flashed upon his mind.

"By all the saints! I cannot enjoy life, or sleep, or food, while that young scout lives."

"He is a *diablo Texano*, and he must die!"

"He shall die by my hand. I swear it by all the saints—I, Juan Cortina, el Ranchero!"

While the outlaw chief muttered thus, in soliloquy, the flames of the burning ranch illuminated the sky, and outlined the timber of the Rio Frio; shooting above the broad expanse of oaks and mesquites.

As Cortina had jerked his horse to a halt, he had discovered the rancheros dashing in a body at terrific speed toward the mesquite belt and Dean's Ranch. Then they disappeared within the thorny thickets, while he was still communing with himself.

Then the bandit leader swept the plain to the westward, up the Nueces, with keen glance, discovering the cavalrymen, who were then attending to their dead and wounded, some coming toward him and their camp, bearing their maimed comrades upon rude stretchers formed of saplings covered with blankets.

Others were upon their horses acting as escorts, their carbines held ready, as if they expected the bottom-timber to emit another horde of yellow-skinned foes.

But in advance of all dashed a buckskin-clad Texan, and Cortina gritted his teeth as he hissed the words:

"It is Chaparral Carl! He comes for the maiden he left in the thicket of thorns."

"He rides well; rides fast. He is riding to his death!"

"Cortina, el Ranchero, will keep his oath to the letter."

CHAPTER XXII.

ESCAPING WITH HIS PRIZE.

As the bandit chief hissed the words with which our last chapter closed, his eyes blazed with fury.

He gave one more glance toward the burning ranch, but not one living, moving object met his view.

"Why do not the fools come?" he exclaimed in anxiety and anger. "Why did they linger after firing the ranch?"

"If the Texans have not already shot them, they will be 'corralled,' and fall before the carbines of the cavalry."

"Satan curse them for lingering! Must Cortina gallop alone to the Rio Bravo, leaving three-score of his men for the wolves and buzzards of Texas?"

"It is terrible, but revenge is sweet. Yet, what will my men in the mountains say? They will hang back—curse them!—and I shall be forced to shoot a few of them before they will ford the river on another raid of this kind."

"Santa Guadalupe! Disaster and death seem to mark my last trail. My revenge has cost me dear."

"Vamonos!" he yelled to his horse, as he urged the animal on the back trail toward the cavalry camp.

In the outlaw's face could be seen only proud disdain and contempt for the man whom he expected soon to meet; the pleasure he felt at the success of his raid, in spite of what it had cost him, making him care but little for aught else. Yet he bore in mind that he owed all this to Chaparral Carl, who was now approaching the camp and his position at full speed, undoubtedly after the maiden whom he held in his arms. A volcano of rage seethed within Cortina's brain, not only because Carl had guided the cavalry on his trail, but for other disasters which had been occasioned by this young scout's frustrating his plans.

With all this rankling in his mind, Cortina approached the thicket where lay the dead and mutilated soldier, and then urged his horse to the edge of the wash-out.

Well he knew that he could not cross the large "open" in which the camp was situated, and gain a position near the cart-trail, from which he could take advantage of the ford in his flight; for the advance of the cavalry were but a little distance in the rear of the young scout.

Should they hear the report of a revolver

they would drive spurs and dash down the trail to the camp. He would then be at their mercy.

Not only this, but he knew that he would not gain cover on the opposite side of the camp before the young Texan would reach a point in the cart-trail from which he could be easily discovered; for the sounds made by the hoofs of Carl's horse already were in his ears.

Spurring behind a clump of wild plum-bushes, the tops of which reached above his head, Cortina awaited the coming of the man whom he hated with all the intensity of his brutal nature.

Equally prince-like in bearing, and handsome in form and face with Cortina, was Carl Clayton, although less in weight and in height. He presented a picture, as he galloped into the "open," that would have held the admiration of any who have the love of grace and manly beauty in their mental "make-up."

Along the broad level in which the camp was situated bounded Carl upon his panting steed; the animal plunging in affright to the left as it caught a view of the still swaying form of the Mexican spy.

One vengeful glance the young scout shot at the dead bandit, as he jerked his horse to a straight course across the level "open." Then his gaze became fixed upon the thicket in which he had left poor Dora Dean—his more than life, the one of all others on earth to him.

At that very instant Cortina, the Scourge of the Bravo, bounded from the thicket into plain view in the bright moonlight, the rider with his revolver leveled, and the deadly tube pointed at the young Texan!

The horse of the bandit was held by a stiff rein, its neck was arched and its ears lay flat upon it; its fiery eyes flashing with the pain of spurs and the scent of the slaughtered soldier's blood.

The young scout halted on the instant.

There before him was his bitterest and most merciless enemy, holding in his arms the beautiful but senseless form of his most adored one, the angelic being for whom he would, without hesitation, have shed the last drop of his blood!

No more terrible tableau could have been presented to the view of Carl Clayton.

The destroyer of his home and that of his best and most dearly-loved friend; he who had caused to be foully murdered his brave pard, Daring Dick, and the abductor of his darling for the second time—this arch miscreant was before him, and holding his own life at the crook of his finger.

It was little wonder that the young scout, inured to danger though he had been for years, should feel his heart spring to his throat, his breath come in gasps, and his muscles refuse control.

He sat rigid in his saddle, his eyes fixed, in a stony stare, upon the ghastly face and limp form in the arms of this king of outlaws. His features were contorted with an anguish that rendered him unnatural. His very marrow was chilled, but his brain seemed burning and snapping.

Not a fraction of this emotion was due to himself, however. The sight of Dora Dean, in the arms of Cortina, caused all his agony of heart and brain.

"Chaparral Carl, your time has come!

"Satan is about to foreclose the mortgage he holds upon you. The instant you move my bullet bores your brain. You understand that."

"Listen! You, and your pard, Daring Dick, have defeated many of my plans. But yesterday, you led the cavalry on my trail. You knew that I had come to the Frio for revenge. Yes, and I have gained my object, though many of my men have been killed."

"Dean's Ranch is burning to the ground. Daring Dick was slain by the man whose corpse hangs yonder, and this girl was captured by him."

"You rescued her, captured and hung Francisco, but the fates have favored me, and I have regained her."

"Not only that, but I hold your life at the tip of my finger. My whole object has been gained."

"I leave a legacy of grief and anguish to Colonel Dean and his wife. They are now childless, and will even lose your comforting presence."

"Cortina swore revenge, and he has kept his oath, as he ever does to the letter."

"Die, Chaparral Carl! Die!"

As the first word "die" was uttered, the young Texan by a superhuman effort, threw off the oppressive feelings, that clung to him like an incubus, and jerked his revolver; but, as he leveled the weapon, in one quick movement, the chief drew the form of Dora up before him, and, at the same time, pulled trigger. Chaparral Carl's revolver fell to the earth, his arms flew upward, his horse sprung forward, with a snort of terror, and the young scout fell heavily from his saddle; the blood running down his left cheek and temple, his ghastly face upturned to the bright moonlight, his eyes, now sightless, fixed upon the star-studded heavens!

As the report of the revolver sounded, Dora Dean recovered, almost on the instant, and

struggled upright on the saddle-born, clutching at the arm of Cortina. She did not, however, comprehend her position, but kept her gaze upon the spot toward which the revolver in Cortina's hand was pointed.

Thus it was that the poor maiden saw Carl fall from his horse, and lie outstretched, and apparently dead, in the middle of the level moonlit "open."

One glance she flashed at the head of the horse beneath her, then at the face of him whose arm encompassed her waist; and from her lips came such a shriek of terror and horror, as would have curdled the blood of any but her outlaw captor.

Dora had, naturally, been momentarily dazed upon recovering consciousness; but, for all that, the face of him who ruled her heart of hearts was recognized, and recognized as being in the clutch of death.

The recognition of Cortina followed instantaneously.

She was in the power of the man who had caused the death of both brother and lover, and who had plunged her aged parents into an overwhelming sea of misery and despair. The realization of this caused her to shriek out, in her anguish. It was a cry that expressed the full depth of human suffering.

And, with that shriek, went all consciousness of earth, and earthly woe. Dora went out into oblivion once more.

Again Cortina raised his revolver, to make doubly sure of his cowardly work; but, almost as an echo to the cry of Dora sounded a wild yell from a number of men in concert, and the continuous thump of hoofs upon the cart-trail. The bandit chief thrust his pistol into its scabbard, and whirled his horse, just as a half-dozen cavalrymen dashed up toward the open, Major Humphries in the lead.

Cortina waved his sombrero about his head, uttered a yell of taunt and derision; and then, as the major jerked his revolver and spurred toward him, he held up the form of the beautiful Dora, limp and senseless, in triumph.

The next instant, the Scourge of the Bravo drove deep his spurs, his horse sprung into the wash-out, and down the same. Then, with a snort, as the cruel rowels were again buried in the animal's flanks, the magnificent black steed plunged into the swirling waters of the Rio Nueces; swimming into the middle of the river, and then down the swift current, beneath the dark archway formed by the branches that interlocked over the stream.

A full view of the imposing spectacle was caught by the cavalry and their commander, before the outlaw chief disappeared in the darkness; but they dared not risk a shot—as he well knew—for fear of killing the maiden, whom he held to shield him from their bullets.

Up to his belt, beneath the surface of the silvery sheen of waters—the top of the black steed's head, and its nose, in front of him, and the long tail of the animal floating far in his rear—thus, the double load forcing the horse deep in the river, went Cortina, on his lone retreat.

With one more taunting and defiant yell upon his lips, the Scourge of the Bravo disappeared beneath the gloomy archway, through which not even an arrow of the moonlight darted.

And not a ray of light shone for poor Dora—not one bright beam to light up the desolate hearts and home, at what was once Dean's Ranch!

CHAPTER XXIII.

AGAIN ON THE TRAIL.

No sooner had the bandit chief disappeared with his fair captive, than Major Humphries ordered one of his men to attend Carl, ascertain if the young man was dead, and if not, to do all in his power for his recovery.

There was no time to lose, for the major had determined to capture the daring outlaw, and save Miss Dean from the dread fate that he knew was in store for her, were her rescue in the power of man.

For this purpose he gave the order, waving his hand in air—the same clutching a revolver—and at the word, the officer himself dashed toward and into the ford, followed close by five of his command.

But a very short time was spent in the waters, all urging their animals as fast as was possible; and they clambered up the rather steep ascent from the river, then galloping on through the bottom-timber, turning east along the margin of the same at full speed, to intercept the bandit chief.

Upon reaching a point near where he believed Cortina must emerge from the dense shades, Major Humphries ordered a halt, and all sat their horses, silent, and listening intently for any sound from the bottom-timber.

All was still, however, within the dark shades; naught breaking the stillness of night except the barking of numberless packs of coyotes, and the occasional howl of a gray wolf from the north plain, which was strewn with dead beeves and the corpses of human beings.

The expected crashing of undergrowth, caused by the horse of the bandit chief, was not heard. Major Humphries was not only puzzled at this, but greatly excited and furious at the terrible turn which affairs had taken.

He had been confident of securing the noted outlaw, upon the plain; especially when the latter retreated to the bottom-timber. And again, in the camp that they had recently left, he had not, when

he first caught sight of Cortina, had the slightest doubt that the latter would be taken.

The dash and plunge into the rapid river, a daring and dangerous act, had astounded all the observers. Without doubt, Cortina must have been well acquainted with the formation of the bank, and knew of an easy point of egress from the river and up the steep ascent, or he would have plunged into the stream; evidently, only to be carried down by the swift current into the dense shades, where the waters flowed inky black in appearance.

As moments passed and no sound reached his ears, the major became almost furious.

Cortina had shot his favorite scout, Chaparral Carl—Major Humphries believed the young Texan to be dead—his miscreant followers had killed Daring Dick and fired Dean's Ranch; while now, the dastardly bandit chief had again gotten the young and lovely daughter of Colonel Dean in his power.

Better far, that the poor girl had been killed, than thus be taken by this king of outlaws to his haunts, and to a fate worse than death.

The major had been much impressed by Dora, although he had passed but a few moments in her company; and pity for the terribly-wronged and bereaved girl and her parents was unavoidable.

This was mirrored in his anxious face, and his men had never before seen him in so furious and excited a state. And it was when the patience of the gallant officer was quite exhausted, and he meditated dispatching his orderly for all of his command who were able to mount their horses, that they might beat the timber and inspect the thickets from the ford down the river—it was then that Major Humphries gazed over the broad, level prairie, south of the Nueces, and saw at a glance that the bandit chief had not left the bottom-timber as yet.

At this moment a taunting yell cut the night air—an unmistakable yell, exactly intonated as the one that had been shot out by the outlaw leader, when he had waved his sombrero in derision as he leaped his horse into the dry wash-out, and thence into the Rio Nueces.

Guided by the sound, all gazed spellbound toward the cart-trail, from which they had come; gazed in perfect amazement, for there Cortina sat his magnificent black steed, waving his sombrero in insulting derision and banter as before.

"Forward! Head him off, men! Five hundred dollars to the man who takes him alive!"

Major Humphries threw tactics and discipline to the winds; and the charge was made in helter-skelter, ranger or Indian-like manner.

Little did the major suppose that it was possible for the bandit chief to escape him; but had he been aware of the speed the outlaw's horse was capable of making, he would not only have been less confident, but positive that the charge and pursuit were useless.

Cortina gave the black steed free rein, the animal shooting over the prairie toward the Rio Grande, its nose pointed straight and almost on a level with the base of its ears, which lay back along its neck, and its tail flying in the wind.

And cutting through the air, as the horse flew over prairie-grass and flowers, came a cry so full of anguish that a groan burst from every man.

They saw, in the bright moonlight, the desperate struggles of Dora Dean to free herself from the horrible grasp of the slayer of her lover—of the dastard who had darkened her home and blighted the lives of her aged father and mother!

They saw her arms wildly beating the air, her long disheveled hair flying about herself and her captor, her ghastly face plainly revealed by the moon, as she gazed toward them, clasping her hands prayerfully and pleadingly; while a shriek, terrible to listen to, rent the air.

It was simply a most fearful torture to the pursuers—this sight of suffering so intense, this angelic maiden so terribly placed, and thus pleading for their aid, as the black steed fast widened the distance between them.

And Cortina seemed to know that he was thus torturing the pursuers; for he strove not to hold his captive closely, merely keeping a grip upon his silken sash, which he had secured about her waist. Thus, the poor girl leaned over his shoulder, toward those, who, she had hoped at first would save her.

When, however, the bandit's steed left the cavalry far behind, and the soldiers perceived that it would be impossible for them to overtake Cortina, and made halt; then the poor girl again relapsed into a state of insensibility, as the thought presented itself, that Carl could not again rescue her—that he was dead, and the arm of his murderer was now clasping her!

So intent had been Major Humphries and his men, upon capturing the bandit, that they failed to see a horseman, speeding up the cart-trail, through the timber, to the verge of the same, from the ford.

This horseman caught sight of Cortina, Dora, and the pursuing cavalry, before the latter had gotten two rifle-shots in distance from the Rio Nueces timber. Nearer he approached.

Ghastly as a corpse, the blood welling from the ragged track of a bullet along his skull, his eyes insanely wild, and his teeth grinning together, while his face expressed agony and fury the most intense—thus the new-comer appeared, as he brought his panting horse to a halt.

This lone rider was none other than Chaparral Carl.

The bullet of Cortina had glanced along his skull, and but stunned him; a slight notion of his horse, as the bandit chief had pulled trigger, having saved the young scout from death. He had been revived by the soldier whom Major Humphries had ordered to attend him; and then, in a moment, Carl took in all the scene before him.

Dora, his darling, was doomed, did Cortina but reach the south side of the Rio Grande!

Once beyond the Bravo, there would be little hope of saving her from the dastard, who was now clutching her to his breast!

The sight, now presented to him, was one of the most hellish torture to Chaparral Carl.

He felt that he would go mad, were he to be compelled to view his darling thus, for any length of time. But what could be done?

He knew that it was not only useless for the cavalry to pursue that fleet steed, but for himself,

mounted as he then was. Nevertheless, he wheeled his horse half about, drove spurs, galloped toward and through the ford, and the timber beyond; and then, without mercy, plied spurs, and pricked the animal with his bowie, dashing over the plain toward Dean's Ranch again.

The soldier, who had waited upon him, yelled from the camp, as he passed; but Carl paid no attention to him, nor to those near the cart-trail on the plain, who were proceeding toward their camp with their wounded comrades.

All believed that Chaparral Carl had gone insane.

And, indeed, he had—as well as Colonel Dean, his wife, and daughter—he had had sufficient torture of mind to drive him mad.

But, for all that, Carl was far from being off his "cabase;" indeed his reasoning powers under the circumstances, were most remarkable.

He had recalled the fact that his own noble steed, Racer, must have had sufficient time to recover from the run he had forced upon the animal, after leaving the cavalry on the trail of the bandits; as well as being refreshed and strengthened by sufficient feed, for Carl knew that little Persim had taken the best of care of him.

Once upon his own fleet black steed, and there was some chance of overtaking Cortina, who would be forced to seek a hiding-place and sleep, and allow his horse to graze before morning.

Carl did not wish—in fact he felt that he could not—meet the colonel or Mrs. Dean.

He had told Colonel Dean that Dora was safe; that he had rescued her from the bandits, and how could he now reveal the terrible fact that Cortina had the poor girl again in his power.

Better far that they should remain in ignorance of his, or Dora's whereabouts, than know the fearful truth.

Having thus reasoned and decided, Carl avoided the natural avenue, and gained the corrals unobserved; the conflagration having died down—the dwelling of the colonel, and the negro cabins, being but smoldering ruins.

Little Persim, the young man found, fast asleep near the main corral; and, awakening the boy, and impressing upon him the importance of secrecy, bidding him not to mention the fact that he had returned for the horse, Carl changed his saddle and bridle to his fleet favorite, mounted and galloped at full speed, through oaks and mesquites, and thence over the plain, and down the cart-trail past the cavalry camp.

There he halted but a moment to explain to Major Humphries his object, which he swore to accomplish or die in the attempt.

With encouraging words, the major grasped the hand of the young scout, in farewell; bidding him "God-speed." The few surviving soldiers gave a loud cheer, and Chaparral Carl urged his superb black horse through the ford, and free from the timber.

Thence he shot over the far-stretching plain, at terrific speed, to the rescue of his darling Dora, and with a vow registered that he would plant a bullet in the brain of Cortina, the Scourge of the Bravo!

It was a mission that seemed to all, doubtful and difficult, if not impossible of accomplishment.

Nevertheless, they said heartily, "God-speed you," and so say we, Chaparral Carl!

CHAPTER XXIV.

RETREAT OF THE OUTLAWS.

THE party of bandits who had desecrated the slain at the ranch hastened through the oak-openings to the border of the mesquite belt, making halt within the thorny screen to gaze over the plain and decide if it was safe for them to strike across it and rejoin their leader.

They still carried their dead comrades before them on their saddles; three in number, the fourth having been left in the avenue, where they dared not venture.

They arrived just in time to see the infuriated rancheros gallop at terrific speed into the mesquites toward the burning ranch, and all shuddered—as well they might—at their narrow escape from the vengeful Texans.

Had they remained a short time longer at the ranch, they would all doubtless have been hurled into the flames that they themselves had kindled.

When the latter reached the blazing dwelling and beheld the corpse of Dick Dean where the outlaws had placed it, their fury would know no bounds.

Their trail would without doubt be followed at daylight, the trailers mounted upon fresh animals; and their chances to reach a place of safety beyond the Rio Grande would be slim indeed.

Thus thought the miscreant Mexicans, as the rancheros darted headlong into the mesquites at a point half a mile east of their position.

And a careful inspection of the plain did not cause them to be less anxious in regard to their safety. There they saw a number of cavalrymen, as the glitter of the moon upon their arms and accoutrements proved, scattered here and there, evidently caring for their wounded and conveying them upon stretchers down the stream.

Not one of their comrade bandits was in view.

The corpses of the slain were nowhere to be seen. The dead cattle were being torn by hundreds of snarling coyotes, and the long-drawn howl of the gray wolf at times sounded on the night air with the occasional weird shriek of the panther.

It was not a scene to give much confidence as to the probability of their reaching the bottom of the Rio Nueces in safety. The evidences before them indicated that Cortina had been defeated.

Had this not been so, the scattering cavalrymen would not be on the open plain. Neither would the rancheros have deserted the soldiers, had there remained any force able to cope with them in the vicinity.

Thus reasoned these miscreants, and they were filled with fright and apprehension.

In spite of these unavoidable deductions, they knew that they must cross the plain in the bright moonlight, for certain death was in their rear.

"Caramba!" hissed one, in mingled fear and disappointment, "where is El Capitan Cortina?"

"Our chief hides in the timber, or gallops to the Bravo. Who can tell which?" answered another.

"He is not in the timber," said the first speaker;

"or he would dash out and shoot the soldiers. There are but few of them."

"Perhaps our comrades have been mostly slain," suggested the other slowly, and as if doubting the truth of his own words. "It looks so. The Texans defeated the plans of our chief. He thought to shoot all the soldiers before others could come up."

The mention of the rancheros caused all to turn in their saddles, and look back into the shades toward the burning ranch with increased apprehension; their yellow faces lit up by the distant flames, their black, serpent-like eyes flashing with a nervous excitement born of their perilous position.

"A thousand demons!" exclaimed the one who had first spoken, in a desperate tone of voice.

"*Vamonos!* I shall not stay here to be shot in the back. *Vamo-os, camarades?*"

As he uttered the last words the speaker drove spurs, his mustang with a snort bounding free from the mesquites, and out upon the open plain; turning eastward, and aiming to strike their former lurking-place near the camp.

Afar to the right they saw the cavalrymen conveying the wounded along the border of the bottom-timber of the Nueces; and an escort of half a dozen soldiers led by an officer in their front. The bandits now believed that this escort would discover them, and cut them off.

They were between two fires, and saw but little hope of escape; yet more vengeful enemies were at the ruined ranch, ready, perhaps, to gallop toward the plain in pursuit of them.

As the cowards trembled in their saddles at their desperate and dangerous position, the sound of a revolver-shot met their ears, and they saw the escort drive spurs, and gallop along the verge of the timber; soon darting from view down the cart-trail. That coast, then, was clear.

Now was their chance, and they realized the fact.

"*Vamonos!*" yelled the one who appeared to be the leader; "*vamonos*, or the wolves of the Rio Nueces will tear our flesh, and our bones will bleach on this plain to be kicked about by these *diablos Texanos!*"

And away toward the dark shades they bounded at terrific speed, not sparing their mustangs.

The pistol-shot heard by the bandits was that fired by Cortina at Chaparral Carl, and it was a lucky shot for some of his followers. These half-dozen outlaws gained the cover of the timber when their chief was on the opposite side of the river; he having just clambered up the bank from the river, with his fair captive in his arms.

Had they known this they would have rejoined their leader; but the cavalry would most certainly have overtaken them in the chase that followed, as they could not have kept up with Cortina's fleet steed—indeed, they would have been left far behind.

Thus situated, they dared not proceed into the timber toward the river, for fear the cavalry would hear them crashing through the undergrowth; so they were forced to remain as they were on the border of the wood, in silence, but listening intently all the while.

They knew that they were in the vicinity of the soldier camp, and they also knew that the cavalry-men who were bearing their wounded comrades from the field must have observed them.

They had no means of knowing how many soldiers were in the camp; and they well knew that they must make a dash past the same, and down the cart-trail, thence through the ford, and ride for life over the plain toward the Rio Bravo.

No longer did they entertain hopes of there being any considerable force of their comrades on the Nueces. They were, it was evident, in little less danger than when in the mesquites.

All became daringly desperate.

To remain long where they were was certain death—an ignominious and terrible death by the rope, if captured by the Texans—they would wound them, cripple them purposely, for that particular object—the satisfaction of hanging them!

Yet, desperate as was their situation, they dared not, at once, attempt to run the gantlet; and, as they lingered, they perceived a horseman dart from the wood, west of their position, and dash frantically over the plain, in the direction of Dean's Ranch.

All recognized the rider at once, and curses, loud and deep shot through their grating teeth, as they clutched the handles of their murderous *cuchillos*. Thus they sat their steeds, filled with abject terror; for they believed the young scout was hastening to the ranch for the Texans to bring them on the trail of the outlaws, beyond the Rio Nueces.

This belief caused them to abandon their proposed dash across the ford. Should they reach the south plain, the rancheros would soon be galloping after them and upon fresh horses.

They could not hope to get beyond view, on the far-spreading, moonlit prairie, toward the Rio Grande, before the Texans forded the Nueces.

Curses, most bitter and terrible, were muttered by all; though three of their number held before them the ghastly corpses of their slain comrades, who, but a short time previous, had laughed and boasted of the vengeance they proposed to have upon the hated Gringos.

For the present, at least, they felt that they were safe in the timber.

Even had the cavalrymen observed them, the latter would not suppose them to be such fools as to remain at the point at which they had entered the timber. The soldiers would think they had, at once, passed through the bottom, crossed the river, and hastened to rejoin their comrades in the retreat.

Had they known anything in regard to the banks of the stream, they would have attempted to cross below the ford. But in the Egyptian-like darkness this attempt would be braving death by drowning.

These, and like thoughts filled the minds of the miscreant Mexicans; and they consoled themselves, while waiting for something to turn up, by rolling and smoking their inevitable shuck cigarettes, one after another, blowing the smoke from their nostrils.

Thus they remained, until they again discovered a horseman galloping madly from the mesquites, coming from the direction of Dean's Ranch.

It was not long before they recognized him.

It was Chaparral Carl.

He had not, then, been to the ranch for help. What had been his object?

"*Caramba!*" hissed the leader; "he has been after his horse. He rides in pursuit of our chief."

"Comra les, our knives shall split his heart! I swear it by all the saints—I, Jose Maria!"

"*Viva Cortina!*" cried out another; "we will cross the Bravo, as a hundred soldiers stood in our way. Chaparral Carl shall die! The prairie wolves shall gnaw his bones—I swear it!"

The new-born reckless bravado, thus expressed by the bandits, was due to the effects of the contents of a flask of liquor, in which they had indulged; having, but a few minutes before, recalled the fact that it was in one of their *maletas*.

The liquor was a potent one. It was the maddening *mescal* of Mexico.

They waited a reasonable time, after Carl had galloped into the timber—sufficient time to allow the young scout to gain some distance from the Rio Nueces. Then the six outlaws made their way, singly, along the border of the timber, in the shade of the outer branches, and in the direction of the cart-trail.

The soldiers had gone to their camp, by this time, bearing their wounded with them.

Slowly the bandits proceeded, until they arrived at a point, where they must, in a moment, be exposed to view from the camp.

Peeping through the bushes, they discovered that the attention of the cavalrymen was taken up in their care for the wounded, and the preparation of their dead for burial.

The leader raised his *escopeta*, and cocked the weapon, glancing back at his comrades, significantly; patting the barrel of his piece, and then waving his hand toward the camp.

The next instant, with terrific yells, the outlaws drove deep their spurs, and darted forward into view; all firing at once, at the groups of soldiers, who perceived them not.

The mustangs of the bandits bounded with frantic flight, and loud snorts, down the cart-trail, and into the ford.

The miscreants had made their first move.

Loud tones of command reached the ears of the Greasers, as they urged their beasts, all floundering through the stream.

Then followed the crack of carbines, and the "zip," and "whirr" of bullets.

"Blue whistlers" spattered the water on all sides of the dastardly desperadoes; a perfect hail of lead, peppering upon them.

With horrible yells of agony, and the most dread terror, mingled with outcries of "*Madre de Dios,*" three of the bandits slid from their frantic mustangs, and sank beneath the silvery sheen of waters.

With them, were the bodies of their comrades, who had been slain at Dean's Ranch; and which they had sworn to give burial, and prevent the wolves from tearing.

The remaining three, however, reached the opposite bank in safety, and there, with the most taunting yells, waved their sombreros in derision. They then drove spurs once more, galloping like madmen over the plain, toward the south; heading for the Rio Grande.

And, far ahead of them, the outlaws saw, on the prairie, a black spot.

The leader fairly shrieked, in insane glee and exultation at the sight.

"*Caramba!*" he yelled; "it is Chaparral Carl. Our knives shall split his heart!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A FATHER'S MADNESS.

MAJOR HUMPHRIES had, after returning from the fruitless chase after Cortina, ordered all the horses to be rubbed down and then staked out; being left under a small guard.

The animals had been severely taxed in the long trail from Ringold Barracks.

So it happened that, when the bandits galloped down the trail to the ford, there was not a horse in the camp; and, had there been, it would have been doubtful whether they could have overtaken the outlaws, on their hardy and long-winded mustangs.

But, after seeing three of the miscreants fall, the major had but little concern for Chaparral Carl.

He knew that the young scout was not the man to allow foes to approach, without knowing of the fact, and guarding himself against them.

Carl was as cunning as an Apache, and Major Humphries hoped for the best, in regard to the young man's success in the object he had in view.

But the gallant major was quite demoralized in mind. The loss of such a number of his men greatly worried him, although he well knew that the large list of the enemies slain, on his official report, would more than counterbalance the effect produced upon the Department by his reverses.

No wagons, or pack-mules, had been brought upon the trail; each man having six days' rations in his haversack, so the major was anxious to return as soon as possible.

One fact, which troubled him, was the well-known prejudice of both rangers and rancheros against the army. The latter would be blamed for permitting the bandits to ravage the American side of the Rio Grande. But for the rancheros, in the present instance, this entire detachment would have been shot, to a man. The major knew this to have been the case, yet he did not care to acknowledge it openly. Hence his mental worry.

He was much relieved, on being informed by the surgeon, that four rancheros had been brought in, desperately wounded, who had been attended to, professionally, by him. This would cause the Texans to look upon their allies in a more favorable light. The dead rancheros, three in number, had also been brought in, and prepared for burial.

Soon after the dash of the outlaws, down to the ford, a half-dozen Texans galloped into the cavalry camp, to learn what had become of their killed and wounded; and they were much gratified, when they learned of the kind consideration that had been manifested by the soldiers for their unfortunate companions.

By them, Major Humphries was informed that Dean's Ranch had, with the negro cabins, been burned to the ground; four of the slaves killed, and the corpse of Daring Dick hung by the neck amid the flames of his home.

It was with some satisfaction that the major was

able to state that three of the bandits had been shot, and that they, and their three dead comrades from the ranch, were probably, at that time, floating down the Rio Nueces.

The rancheros thought it strange that the cavalry horses had been divested of their equipments, and taken away from the camp, thus permitting the remaining three outlaws to escape; but they refrained from expressing themselves on the subject, from a sense of kindness received.

But Major Humphries had a disclosure to make, which would infuriate the Texans. This was brought to the front, by their inquiring for Chaparral Carl and Dora Dean.

When the major revealed the fact that Dora had been recaptured by Cortina, and Carl wounded, and left for dead; the bandit chief speeding toward the Rio Grande on his fleet steed, which he and his men could not overtake—when all this had been told, and also that Carl had ridden back to the ranch for his own horse, and gone in pursuit of Cortina, vowing to kill the outlaw leader, and rescue the maiden—then, indeed, were the Texans, not only wild with rage, but dumfounded.

It was difficult for them to believe that such an avalanche of misery could be permitted.

Could it be possible that Dora Dean, the pride, the belle and beauty of the lower Frio, was a captive, in the power of Cortina, and Le now fleeing with her to the Rio Grande?

Not one of the rancheros would have conveyed such dread intelligence to the bereaved parents, for all the gold in the universe.

Not one there present but would have braved death a score of times to rescue Dora Dean.

In their fury and excitement their eyes blazed with a thirst for vengeance, and forgetting their own dead and wounded, they all, with fierce yells, started as one man, plunged through the ford, and dashed madly on the trail of the bandits last seen by the soldiers—the trail also of Chaparral Carl, and Cortina, the outlaw king!

But there was no need to look for "signs."

Far over the prairie, in their front, were three black dots on the moonlit scene.

The six brave Texans resolved that they would "rub out" forever those three dots from the landscape; that they would remove them from this beautiful earth.

Major Humphries was somewhat startled, and the soldiers as well, at the abrupt departure of the infuriated rancheros; but after a moment's reflection, he arrived at the conclusion, which was the only one. They had not taken the dead and wounded to the Rio Frio, because they had not the heart to bear the news to that poor father and mother that their darling had again been abducted, and this time by Cortina in person—himself a fugitive and alone.

When the major thought this over, coupled with the fact that the rangers and rancheros all held Chaparral Carl and Daring Dick in their highest esteem, he ceased to think strange of the sudden dash of his recent visitors after the surviving bandits, and to assist in the rescue of Dora, and the capture of Cortina.

Soon after, the major and his command, with the exception of the guard, rolled their weary forms in their blankets, and were in a little time tightly clasped in the arms of Morpheus.

At Dean's Ranch, after the body of Big Jim had been drawn from the burning dwelling, the scene was horrifying. It was, indeed, a sight to draw tears from the eyes of any.

The towering and hissing flames revealed but too plainly the sad and harrowing scene.

The scorched and gory corpse of the faithful negro, who had sacrificed his life in protecting the remains of his young master, having been considerably placed by that master's side, as if to do the martyred slave all the honor that could now be rendered; the insensible forms of Colonel Dean and his wife were then laid side by side beneath the oaks, where oft they had, with their darlings, Dick and Dora, walked in peace, and pride for their children. Such was the scene now.

But a more harrowing feature still was the wives and children of the negroes, whose bodies were then consumed in the furious flames.

These acted more like maniacs than sane beings. Indeed, they were insane for the time, through their horror and despair, and the sight of the fierce flames with their fearful work.

They danced around the burning dwelling with unearthly screams, pausing from time to time, as if looking to find some point from which they could rescue their dead from the scorching flames. Sometimes it seemed as if some of them would bound into the fire, in their frenzy.

It needs not a very strong imagination to picture this sad and terrible scene to mental view, and to understand how it affected the beholders, those rough and hardy rancheros.

Even Captain Littleton, inured to the fearful spectacles so often left behind them by the bandits and Indians, was obliged to turn his back and lean against the trunk of a huge oak, there to dash the tears from his eyes.

But the brave captain gave vent to his emotion only for a moment, for he realized the necessity for prompt action.

Colonel Dean and his wife, as well as the negroes, must all be removed to the nearest ranch toward Oakville. The dead must be taken away also; so Captain Littleton immediately dispatched some of the rancheros for ambulances, and to notify the neighbor's wife of her coming guests—that neighbor being one of the party sent on the errand.

Two hours afterward the colonel and Mrs. Dean were in as comfortable a condition as could be expected, under the circumstances, at the ranch referred to; the slaves were in good quarters, and everything was being done for them that could be thought of to mitigate their sufferings by the sympathizing friends present.

None could give the slightest information in regard to Chaparral Carl and Dora except little Persim, and he, as instructed, kept his secret to himself.

Had the colonel and his wife known the whole terrible truth, the cup of their affliction would indeed have been full.

It would, beyond all doubt, drive them to absolute insanity, if not to death.

The dead bodies were at once conveyed to the

The Merciless Marauders.

ranch, down the river, and the next morning were consigned to mother earth, a clergyman from Oakville officiating at the funeral.

The remains of Daring Dick were borne back to Dean's Ranch at the request of his parents, and buried beneath a fine oak tree, nearly opposite to the still smoldering ruins of the home where he and Dora had so often sat with their books from childhood to youth and maidenhood.

It had also been a favorite resort for the youthful trio, since Carl Clayton's advent on the Frio, when no clouds had yet arisen upon their sky.

It was most torturing to behold the expression on the faces of the colonel and Mrs. Dean.

Repeatedly they would ask, first of one and then of another, for Dora and Carl; the old soldier seeming to have lost all his vigor and energy, and having more the manner and actions of a child than a man, from the awful anguish and horror that had fallen upon him and his wife. Poor Mrs. Dean was even more affected than her husband.

The neighbors and the rancheros found it no easy matter to find fictitious reasons to advance, in explanation of the non-arrival of Carl and Dora; and, as the time passed, with no intelligence of the missing pair, the reader can readily imagine the mental sufferings that were endured by the aged couple.

Colonel Dean, on the night succeeding the burial, stole stealthily to the corral of his kind host and neighbor, lassoed a horse, and having equipped the animal, bounded into the saddle, and galloped like a maniac toward the Rio Nueces.

He felt, intuitively, that his child had again been lost; and he would go in search of her and Carl. But none knew of his departure.

Thus was the bereaved mother and anxious wife plunged deeper into the dark depths of despair and anguish: almost insupportable, and death like in its intensity.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AT RIO GRANDE CITY.

THE wound of little Benito, the waif of the Rio Grande, did not prove to be of a very serious nature; and the physician, who attended him, enjoined upon his wife and daughters to watch the lad, and furnish him with the strengthening food that he required.

These nurses, however, needed no orders to that effect, for they took great interest in the little fellow; not only from his personal appearance and history, but from their admiration for his bravery, as described by Lorenzo Gomez.

Chaparral Carl was well known to them, and the young scout was a hero in the eyes of all true Texans and friendly Mexicans. On his account, too, little Benito was considered an honored guest, and not a little of a hero himself.

The boy was very grateful for the kind care extended to him, and his thanks were profuse, and constantly expressed, by word and glance of eye; but Benito was ill at ease, cooped up within four walls, and forced by his, perhaps over-considerate nurses, to remain quietly in bed.

Not only this, but the little fellow's mind was greatly troubled in regard to Chaparral Carl, who, as has been stated, was looked upon by him with feelings that were akin to reverence.

From the fact that it had been through the information he had gained through the bandit spies, and revealed to Carl, that the latter had, at once, started on the trail of Cortina, the lad reasoned that should his friend and benefactor be slain, he would be, in a measure, responsible for it.

Benito could not bear to think of such an occurrence, and his mind was greatly worried all the time that he remained in the care of Senor Gomez. He had formed the opinion, as had many who were older and more experienced than himself, that the bandit chief was invincible; that he bore a charmed life, was protected by the Evil One—and this caused him to fear that Carl, being reckless and daring, would engage in personal conflict with Cortina, and be slain.

Besides this, the lad was confident that the outlaw chief had taken a large force with him; and, as there was but a comparatively small detachment of cavalry, the latter, if no rancheros or rangers joined them, would have little chance of coming out victors. Indeed the bandits might, being so far from the Rio Grande, and desperate, be more watchful than usual, discover the cavalry, and ambush. The result in that case, was easy of prediction.

The more such thoughts as these worried Benito the more determined he became to follow Chaparral Carl; and perhaps, he reasoned, it would again be in his power to save the young scout's life—the life of the best friend he had ever known.

With this determination in his mind, the boy had asked Senor Gomez, if he would loan him a horse, that he might ride out, and meet the detachment of cavalry when he got better; his wound having healed rapidly from the pulp of the *nopal*, or prickly pear, that had been frequently applied to it.

Lorenzo not only promised the lad he should have a horse to ride, but that the animal should be his own; that Benito must accept it as a gift, in consideration of his service to the Lone Star State.

Further than this, the ranchero pointed out to the lad, from the window, a fiery pinto mustang, which had been broken to the saddle.

This, with a complete outfit, was then and there presented to the thankful and delighted Benito; but Senor Gomez and his wife had not the remotest idea that the little fellow would make use of the gift so soon as he did.

Benito knew that the worthy ranchero and his family would strongly object indeed forbid, his departure, before his wound had entirely healed; so he resolved to leave the ranch in the night time.

So it happened that on the same night of the fight on the Rio Nueces, between Cortina's force and the cavalry and rancheros, that little Benito attired himself in his buckskin breeches and *jaqueta*, buckled his belt of arms about his waist, and stole stealthily from the dwelling of Senor Gomez; when the latter was absent at a neighboring ranch, and the senora and her daughter were asleep.

Saddling and bridling the mustang, which he immediately named Pinto, the boy led the animal from the corral, slowly over the sward, until at a distance from the dwelling. He then climbed into the saddle, slowly and painfully, and driving spurs home, sped along the cattle-paths, through the cacti and mes-

quites, toward the northwest; by taking which course, he knew that he could avoid much twisting and turning, and get clear of the chaparral, much sooner than if he followed the course taken by the cavalry.

Desolate indeed was the wide belt that extended from the Rio Grande afar to the north.

The ground was cracked and seamed with the heat of the sun, and fairly baked where it was not covered with dense thickets of cacti and other thorny shrubs.

There was no grass, except small "circlets" about the stems of the mesquites, where the chaparral was not dense; and even this had little pellets from which extended needle-like points.

The tough globe-cactus, with its long thorns, which would penetrate the frog of the foot and lame a horse, were to be seen here and there; and the soap-weed and Spanish dagger, both of the same family, or species, were there as well.

At times Benito was lucky enough to secure the flower-stem of the maguay, or Mexican aloe—the sweet, luscious and pulpy pip of which he devoured with avidity and satisfaction.

The red and yellow—most brilliant in color in that barren belt—fruit of the prickly pear served to assuage his thirst; but he knew at what stage of ripeness to pluck the same, or it would have caused serious consequences.

Luckily the moon arose soon after the little waif's departure, guiding him on his lonely way through one of the most sterile regions, as far as grazing and water were concerned, that there is on the American continent, if we except the Bad Lands and the Llano Estacado.

Benito soon discovered that Pinto was a remarkably active and fiery horse, the movements of the animal being indeed electric-like. He was filled with boyish pride at being the owner of such a beast, and also with thankfulness to Senor Gomez for having made him so valuable a present.

On went the little equestrian without halt, except for the purpose of cooling his fevered tongue and throat with the pulp of the maguay or the fruit of the nopal—all through the night and the cool of the following day he rode, his speed being necessarily slow on account of his wound.

Then at last the determined boy halted, having reached a point where the short, curly mesquite grass, the most nutritious of any that grows on the earth, covered the ground—a thick mat of verdure, thick as the wool of an unshorn Northern sheep.

Benito did not camp, however, until he came upon a water-hole, which, although brackish, was most welcome to himself and horse.

After satisfying his own thirst and allowing Pinto to drink, the lad led the horse to a natural "open" in the mesquites, clumps of which were all around. There he removed the equipments, and staked his pony.

With his saddle, bridle, and *maletas*, which latter he had taken the precaution to pack with corn flapjacks and dried beef, he proceeded to a dense thicket some distance from his horse, knowing the danger of falling into a deep slumber—which he knew would be liable to overcome him—in that section of the country.

When within the thicket he cleared a space from grass-burrs and thorns, ate a hearty breakfast, which he washed down with brackish water, and then lay down upon his blanket, falling almost immediately into a deathlike slumber.

It was long past noon when Benito awoke.

Then he again satisfied his hunger, which was keen, pounded some prickly pear to a pulpy mass, and applied the same to his wound; after which, he equipped Pinto, led the animal to water, mounted, and proceeded on his way.

When night came, the boy camped near the head of Palo Blanco creek, which was nearly half-way to Dean's Ranch. This was bordered by dense thickets of mesquites; the same being unusually large in the vicinity of the stream.

Little did Benito know how opportune was his arrival at this point, or dream of the important service that it was destined to be in his power to perform for his revered benefactor, Chaparral Carl, and a most terribly bereaved and suffering girl.

But we anticipate.

Let us explain as briefly as possible.

Provident, ordained that after a long and fatiguing gallop at a fearful rate of speed, Cortina the Scourge, with his unfortunate captive, Dora Dean—who was now nearer dead than alive—should reach a spot on Polo Blanco creek but a rifle-shot in distance from that at which Benito, the Waif, had encamped.

At the time of which we are writing, this was an unsettled district, there being no ranch for many miles down the creek. None, except wandering sheep and goat herders—miserable Mexicans of the lowest grade—were to be met with in the vicinity, and these but seldom.

Benito knew well, from the apprehensive and excited state of Chaparral Carl, that the latter felt positive Cortina's raid pointed toward Dean's Ranch—that the bandit chief had entered Texas for the express purpose of revenge upon Dick and himself, and upon the parents of the former—the outlaw bearing the most intense hatred toward all who had fought against his country in the Mexican war.

Besides this, Cortina had sworn to kill both of the scouts, or pards, of the Lower Frio.

Consequently, Benito had not followed the trail, but, as far as possible, favored himself and his horse, by selecting easy traveling ground; being well acquainted with the route to Oakville, in the near vicinity of which was Dean's Ranch.

After watering his mustang, and staking the animal in a secure place amid the mesquites, where there was most excellent grazing, the boy partook of his primitive supper—the cold *tortillas*, or corn-cakes, being almost as tough as rawhide—and then lay down upon his blanket to sleep.

Hardly had the lad closed his weary lids, however, when out on the night air shot a piercing shriek—a shriek which Benito well knew must have proceeded from the lips of a woman, and which was given out in the most terrible strength of fear, horror and despair.

Instantly the Waif of the Rio Bravo sprung to his feet, his eyes expressing the most dumbfounded amazement, his little hand clutching at the handle

of his knife, and his features stamped with sympathy, pity, and a stern resolution.

But a moment stood Benito thus.

Then he stole, silently and stealthily as an Apache brave, up Palo Blanco creek and through the thorny thickets.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE RESCUE.

THE progress of little Benito was of necessity slow and tedious, being forced to crawl through the chaparral. He dared not proceed between the thickets at a distance from the stream and circle toward the point whence the shriek had emanated for fear that he would be discovered.

He was confident that some female was in distress, but he well knew that none would be in that part of the country if not forcibly brought thither.

The thought occurred to the boy that ample time had passed for Cortina to have reached Dean's Ranch and be now on his return, and with a captive. He therefore proceeded cautiously, for he knew that his life would not be worth a picayune were he discovered by Cortina or one of his bandits.

Crawling in the direction of the sound that had reached him, Benito came to the border of a small open in the mesquites and parting the foliage, gazed forth.

Only one glance gave the lad, and then sunk back, trembling in every limb with excitement, not devoid of fear, for his wound had greatly weakened him.

The identity of the horse could not be mistaken by one reared on the Rio Grande, where they studiously inspect every lone animal met with, as, indeed, do all Texans in the stock-raising district, retaining, as they do, every brand, ear-mark, and general description in mind.

Benito at once recognized the superb black steed of Cortina, the king of the bandits.

If the boy had been careful in proceeding previous to that discovery, he was now doubly so; for he supposed that the entire band had arrived at Palo Blanco creek on their return from their raid. He listened intently, but no sounds met his ear to indicate that the large number of horses he had reason to believe were in the vicinity, were really within a long distance.

Indeed, there was not the slightest break in the stillness, except the sounds caused by Cortina's steed.

Had the keen-eared chief detected his presence and gagged his victim? It must be so.

Again the lad proceeded slowly, and with all the caution he could practice. He knew not, in the amazed bewilderment which the discovery had occasioned, the exact point whence the shriek had come.

He had lost his bearings.

He knew the direction in which the creek was situated, and he reasoned that at the camp of the outlaw, or outlaws, was near the stream, probably upon the bank of the same.

The absence of any sounds that would indicate the presence of other animals greatly puzzled Benito, and forced him to the conclusion that the bandit chief must be alone.

Slipping his revolver and knife to the front, he was not only ready for instant action, but resolved to sell his life dearly. Thus he went on toward the little stream, the mesquites becoming thicker as he advanced. Every time he placed his little hand on the ground, his arm quivered and trembled, for he was confident that he was drawing near the presence of one who would torture him to death for acting the spy upon him.

Benito believed that the outlaws knew him to be a friend of Chaparral Carl and Daring Dick, and that he had given these scouts information as to their movements. It was not strange, therefore, that the little lad, weak as he was, now trembled in every limb.

But, he was soon to have all doubts removed as to Cortina himself being near; for he reached the vicinity of the creek, and in a small, clear, moonlit "open," amid the mesquites, he discovered in front of him a sight that drove every drop of blood from his face, and caused him to be sick and faint. And well the boy might.

Lying upon a brilliantly-colored *serrape*, or Mexican blanket, on his back—his handsome face upturned to the moon, but partly shaded by his sombrero—was the muscular form of Cortina, the Scourge, the Chaparral Cock, the dastardly, miscreant bandit of the Bravo!

One glance, however, satisfied Benito that the outlaw king was asleep, and his fear partially vanished.

The lad paused and watched him carefully.

Peacefully as an infant slept Cortina, although fresh from scenes of slaughter, and knowing that the corpses of most of his band were now being torn by wolves on the plain between the Rio Nueces and the Rio Frio.

For one full minute the gaze of Benito was fastened upon the face of Cortina, whose head was pillow'd upon his gayly-decorated saddle.

The lad was, for the moment, fascinated by this sight; being unable to remove his gaze, or even to draw a long breath, for the eyes of the outlaw were shaded, and for the life of him Benito could not decide whether the lids were partially apart or not.

Was the bandit chief assuming sleep?

Was he, at this moment, peeing from beneath his sombrero-brim, exultantly, upon him, gathering his strength for one desperate bound?

Benito soon decided otherwise.

By a powerful effort of will he threw off the oppressive fascination caused by the discovery of Cortina, and his thoughts in connection with him.

He recalled the shriek, and his self-imposed mission, and then swept the little "open" with keen gaze: tearing, as it were, his eyes from the face and form of the outlaw chief.

The boy was instantly more deeply impressed, more excited and tremulous, by that which he now saw, than when he discovered Cortina; but they were far different emotions that ruled his brain. He felt pity and sympathy, to the very depths of his soul; but this was only for a moment. His muscles became firm, his eyes blazing with indignation—even furious in expression, and a desperate determination shone upon his youthful face.

And well might such a sight create, and hold firm such feelings in any one who had a spark of humanity in his heart.

At first Benito had seen nothing; but, as he leaned lightly forward, he saw, in the very edge of the "open," shaded from the moon by the overhanging branches, a maiden, lovely but deathlike.

A wad of buckskin was between her teeth, her clothing was torn, and her wrists and ankles bound.

The sight tortured the boy, and the face of the young girl made a strange impression upon him.

His thoughts were busy.

Where had he seen a face resembling that of the captive maiden? At last he gave a start.

Like a flash came, before his mental vision, the face of Daring Dick!

The captive must be the young Texan's sister.

Cortina's force must have been defeated, else the chief would not be thus alone.

All these conclusions came at once into Benito's mind, and the youth resolved that he would attempt the rescue of Dora Dean.

Slowly he crawled around to her side, keeping keen eyes on the sleeping outlaw; and, with a low hiss of warning, reached forward, and pulled the gag from her mouth. Then he whispered:

"Silence, señorita! Death is in the air. I am Benito. Chaparral Carl and Daring Dick are my friends, and I will save you!"

The eyes of the captive girl lighted up at his words.

Instantly the keen blade of the lad severed the bonds that bound her ankles and wrists. He knew that Dora could not walk without support, and also that it would be impossible to take her the way he had himself come; for the noise they would make in going through the bushes would awaken the bandit chief, and betray them.

But there was no time to lose. The bright little fellow was not long in seeing what he had to do.

To decide was to act. He stepped over the still recumbent form of the young girl, and soon stood within ten feet of the outlaw leader, his hand clutching his revolver. At the moment Cortina, with a groan, rolled over upon his right side, his face turned from Benito, who still held his thumb upon the hammer of his pistol.

Never will you know, Juan Cortina, how near you were to death, at the hands of a boy, in the chaparrals of Palo Blanco creek!

Confident that the bandit was thoroughly fatigued and prostrated by loss of sleep for some time, Benito quickly assisted Dora to her feet, and to the creek, which they entered; the maiden casting, over her shoulder, glances of terror and apprehension, toward her sleeping captor.

Walking slowly through the shallow waters, the two reached the point where Benito had been resting.

"We must not speak," said the little fellow, in a low tone, "this is no time to talk."

Dora stood trembling, while Benito hastily saddled Pinto, and then assisted her to mount.

Bidding her ride a hundred yards to the south, in a direct line, the boy promised that he would join her in a few moments.

The maiden clasped the hand of her little preserver, striving to detain him.

"Why do you leave me?" she said. "Can you not mount with me, and hasten from this horrible place?"

"I shall be with you soon," returned the lad. "I shall now steal the horse of Cortina. If you hear a shot ride fast to the south—to the Rio Grande. It is not safe to ride toward the Rio Nueces."

In five minutes more Benito appeared, leading the black steed of the bandit chief slowly, pride and satisfaction flashing in his eyes as they met Dora's.

Soon he was astride of the beast, by placing one foot in the crotch of a mesquite. He then struck the horse with the slack of his lariat, saying:

"Vmonos, Señorita Dean! Vmonos! Cortina has lost his horse and his captive. You are free!"

Dora urged Pinto on in the rear of the black steed, her heart too full for words, even had there been a chance to speak them.

So on they went, this strangely met pair, on Benito's back trail, toward Rio Grande City. Dora never so much as thinking of objecting to the direction taken by her young preserver, being satisfied and thankful beyond expression that she was hastening from the vicinity of her fiendish captor, Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOPING AGAINST HOPE.

The last view that Chaparral Carl caught of the deeply-wronged Dora, was, as she leaned over the shoulder of her bandit captor, with clasped hands, in pleading and frantic prayer. This sight would remain upon his mind forever.

As may be supposed, Carl, although he loved his noble black, spurred without mercy; knowing that more than life for Dora, and misery or happiness for himself, might depend upon even a single bound of his horse. But, "a stern chase is a long chase"—to use a nautical expression—and, although Carl forced his horse at terrific speed over the prairie yet it did not seem to him that the black speck in front of him, grew any larger or more distinct.

Had the young scout known positively what ford on the Rio Grande, Cortina intended to cross, he would have felt more hopeful. As it was, he was forced to keep in chase; but soon realized that he was gaining, the bandit having evidently slackened his speed.

More hopeful, Carl now pressed onward; looking back presently on the trail—being, by an uncountable influence, forced to do so—when he perceived that three horsemen were riding, at a considerable distance, behind him; while, afar toward the Rio Nueces, he could see six black dots upon the plain.

The character and object of these two parties of horsemen, he had no means of knowing; but he felt no anxiety as to his being overtaken by either of them, as long as he rode his favorite Racer.

The young Texan's suspicion was, that the horsemen, both in the rear, and to the west, were the survivors of the body-guard of Cortina, and of the party that had burned Dean's Ranch; and his surmise was correct, with the exception of those furthest in the rear. These, as the reader knows, were the rancheros, who had dashed on the trail, from the camp of Major Humphries.

Only a moment's attention did Carl give to those horsemen, but kept on at full speed after Cortina, gaining but little, as the outlaw leader had evi-

dently discovered him, and inferred that he was an enemy.

But it is useless for us to follow the young man through that long and fruitless chase. When at last, the mesquite section was reached, and he could no longer keep Cortina in view, he was forced to proceed at a slower pace, and watch continually for "sign," which was easily detected on the sun-baked clay.

Through the remainder of the night, and the following day, except during the hottest portion of the same, Carl continued on the trail. When, at length, he halted, on his steed's account, he cast himself upon the ground, in utter prostration and fatigue; but, although he had not slept a minute the previous night, and but little on the way from Rio Grande City to the Nueces, he was now unable to do so, from the excited state of his nervous system.

Thus it happened, that Chaparral Carl was within a mile of Palo Blanco creek, when little Benito succeeded in rescuing Dora Dean.

When the brave little lad led the bandit's horse away from the "open," where it had been staked, the noise—slight though it was—aroused Cortina, who half-arose and rested on his elbow.

It was at this moment that Benito halted, and was adjusting the rope around the animal's under-jaw. The outlaw chief glanced across the "open" and discovered that his fair captive was gone!

Then he sprung to his feet and rushed to the spot where Dora had lain. A mad and vengeful expression filled his eyes, but his face revealed nothing of his feelings. The next instant he heard the sound of fast-flying hoofs, and then Cortina knew that he had been outwitted—that his horse had been stolen, and his captive rescued!

He was now afoot, and alone; afar from the Rio Grande—he who had a few days ago led sixty of his cut-throat band, in a mad gallop toward the Rio Nueces, and revenge!

The outlaw knew that it was more than useless to attempt to regain his horse; that he could not overtake the one who had freed his captive.

Cortina wondered who it could have been.

It was strange that the rescuer had not taken advantage of his deep slumber, and driven a knife to his heart. How was it that he had been spared?

He then recalled the fact that men were on his trail—enemies or friends, he knew not which—and, clutching his horse equipments, he stole through the mesquites, to the south; detecting as he went, the sound of hoofs beyond the creek.

Hiding his equipments in a thicket, he went on, in rapid strides, muttering curses as he did so.

Soon after, Chaparral Carl dashed through the creek upon his fleet horse, the young scout holding a cocked revolver in his hand, ready for instant use.

In the camp the "sign" was plain. The severed bonds, and the gag, proved to Carl that Dora had been there. But where was she now? Carl was hopeless and despairing; for the curly mesquite showed no trace by moonlight.

It was strange but true, that Cortina had again escaped death; this time at the hand of his most detested foe, Chaparral Carl. Had the slumber of the bandit chief lasted five minutes more, a bullet from the young scout's revolver would have ended a criminal career. But it was not so to be.

Had Cortina known that Chaparral Carl was the horseman who had dashed into his camp, at the very moment when he plunged on foot through the mesquites from it, the outlaw would, without doubt, have stolen back and shot the young Texan from a covert in the thick bushes.

Poor Carl, not finding the trail became frantic and furious, and again urged on his black steed; speeding toward Roma, which was twenty miles up the Rio Grande. From Rio Grande City, Carl reasoned that the bandit chief would not advance as he dared not there cross the ford.

That Cortina would cross the river at Roma with the intention of proceeding up the Rio Alamo, in Mexico, where it was known he had a rendezvous, or encampment, seemed more reasonable. So the young scout galloped onward by the serpentine paths in the chaparral.

But, could he reach the ford in advance of the outlaw? That was the question.

It seemed probable that he could; for the horse of the bandit carried a double load, and had, but very recently, left his halting-place on Palo Blanco creek, as Carl well knew. The discovery of the gag, and severed bonds, had at first, puzzled Carl; but he concluded that Cortina had heard his approach, and had cut the cords himself, having no reason to keep his captive bound.

The young scout now kept on a bee-line for the Roma ford, as fast as Racer could gallop, speeding on, and still on; the most anxious and agonized man probably on earth. The course taken by him, and that of Benito with Dora Dean, formed the two sides of a triangle—the camp being its point, and the base the Rio Grande.

The maiden and her youthful preserver were dashing toward Rio Grande City and Carl in the direction of Roma; while Cortina, the Scourge of the Bravo, afoot and alone, strode along, with the fury of a baffled demon flashing from his eyes, toward Roma, his one hope.

This, the bandit chief felt, was his only chance of gaining the Mexican side of the Rio Bravo; and this, he must accomplish, under cover of night.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TRIO OF TRAILERS.

THE three outlaws, who had escaped death at the Nueces ford, spared not spur, in their endeavor to decrease the distance between them and Carl.

They perceived the half-dozen horsemen in their rear, and believed them to be their comrades, who had escaped death in the conflict, and were now speeding to join their chief, and cross the Rio Grande.

However, on through the night rode the trio of dastards, the rancheros gaining fast upon them; and they, little dreaming they were avengers who were on their trail. They thought, too, that Carl would seek some thicket, and encamp, when they could trail him to his covert, and end his life.

In this, too, as we know, they were mistaken, for the young scout, after arriving at Palo Blanco creek, had pressed on toward Roma, on the Rio Grande.

Chaparral Carl might have fallen a victim to the Mexican miscreants, at his first halting-place, had not unforeseen disaster come upon his foes; but it is doubtful, because he had been unable to sleep, from extreme nervousness, caused by privation from food and rest.

In this state, the young man's senses were doubly acute, and he would, without doubt, have detected the approach of his foes, however stealthy their movements might have been.

But, it was destined to be otherwise, as will be seen. The three outlaws did not reach the mesquites, until some time after the young Texan had disappeared within the same; and they were then at a stand-still. It was a perfect labyrinth.

The Mexicans were not acquainted with the Texan side of the Rio Grande. Consequently, at times, they lost the trail, when it led over the thick mats of curly mesquite-grass, where no "sign" could be discerned.

On the other hand, the trail was quite plain where the hard ground was bare; but the bandits lost much time in striking these spots, and soon the party of five—the remnant of Cortina's body-guard, two of whom were wounded—joined the trio, much to their joy; their only thought, at this time, being to escape to Mexico. They no longer hoped to slay Carl.

They were now greatly fatigued, and the two wounded men were in great pain. They decided, therefore, to encamp. They felt confident that by an early start, their mustangs being rested and refreshed, they could reach the nearest point of the Rio Grande and cross to a place of safety before daylight.

This having been decided upon, the animals were soon staked out to graze, while the outlaws had recourse to their *maletas* for food.

Not the slightest suspicion had they that avengers the most merciless were on their trail, they believing that the six horsemen in their rear were some of their comrades, who were now striving to escape like themselves.

Had the party been stronger in numbers, they would have been suspicious and watchful; but as it was, they were careless. Indeed, they had no guard posted, but sat perfectly unsuspecting, enjoying rest and their cigarettes after their hearty meal. Their fire had been kindled in a small depression, not ten feet in diameter, formed by the surface earth which had, for some unaccountable reason, sunk some six feet below the level around it.

There was ample room for all—the entire eight—to sit around it, the blaze revealing plainly their presence to any who might come near.

Thus the infuriated rancheros found them.

Insane for revenge were these Texans, and when they caught a sight of the glow of the fire, every man with a low ejaculation of pleasure jerked his horse to a halt, dismounted, and led his animal into the thicket, where the beasts were lariated, their girths loosened, and their saddles removed.

All this was accomplished without any command or suggestion from any one, all knowing what course ought to be pursued.

Each secreted his rifle among the mesquites, and then, like Apaches on the war-path, the rancheros stole toward the mustangs of the miscreants. Every animal was unloosened from stake or bush, and led slowly away from their owners for some distance, and then all secured.

This was done without the bandits being alarmed, or their suspicions awakened in the least.

Then the Texans, leaving one of their number standing silent, stole to his right and left, circling around the glow that betrayed the position of the villainous followers of Cortina.

This circle grew gradually less in diameter.

The creeping forms, with glittering bowies held tight between their teeth, and revolvers slipped to the front on their belts, crept, Indian-like, to the dry sink-hole, and the fire-glow that marked its position, and that of the dastards around it.

The latter, confident in their present safety and ultimate escape to Montezuma land, smoked placidly their corn-shuck cigarettes.

The miscreants who had fired Dean's Ranch, shot the slaves, slaughtered Big Jim while he bravely defended his young master's corpse, and then desecrated that corpse—made such by one of their comrades—were now doomed to realize, and that soon, that retribution was more than an idle word with Texans. And the survivors of Cortina's body-guard were to meet the same fate.

The marauders from Mexico were surrounded by those who bore in mind the hundred foul crimes, which they were determined to partially avenge.

There was no mercy in the glittering eyes of that little band of slowly creeping Texans.

Nearer and nearer they came to their victims.

Gestures and signs passed between them, over the sink-hole, and then, with a terrific Texas yell, they all sprang to their feet, revolver in right hand, and glittering bowie in left, leveling the deadly tubes at the doomed outlaws.

Then was consternation visible in that little camp.

All except the two wounded ones started up—just six in number, the same as the rancheros—and clutched the handles of their *cuchillos*.

Well had they interpreted the intonation of that terrible yell, and the expression of ruthless revenge that was frozen upon the faces of the avengers.

At the very instant that the bandits gathered all their strength for a desperate dash to escape—a dash from sure death—a shrill, sharp whistle came from one of the rancheros, and every Texan fired.

Then came piercing yells of agony, each outlaw jerking his right hand upward from his belt, and his long knife falling to the ground at his feet.

The right hand of every one had been shattered and rendered useless by the bullets of the Texans.

Then followed two more volleys, the effect of which was seen the instant after the far-sounding reports.

Both hands of each bandit were shattered and streaming with blood, while a bullet had torn its way through the right foot of each one, splintering the instep bone. The outlaws could now neither run nor fight.

Retribution had come upon them, and death stared them in the face. They reeled, and staggered against each other, shrieks of agony and despair shooting from their lips, and ringing through the chaparrals.

The two wounded wretches sprung from their blankets, but the next moment fell back limp and lifeless, the leaden messengers of death from the Texan revolvers having pierced their brains.

The scene was horrible; but fifteen minutes afterward another sight, equally as torturing to an observer, might have been seen within twenty yards of the same spot. It was one that was often beheld in the Cortina war, where quarter was neither asked nor given on either side.

A mesquite-tree, much larger than any that met the view on any other side, grew at the point referred to, and beneath that tree stood the six mutilated miscreants, with noosed lariats about their necks.

The slack ends of these lariats had been cast over limbs, and then secured each to the horn of a saddle, the same being buckled upon a mustang.

These animals had been equipped to take part in the execution of their masters.

A Texan ranchero clutched the bridle rein of each animal with his left hand, a Mexican quirt in his right. A just hatred for the now helpless and doomed assassins blazed in the eye, and was marked upon the face of each Texan avenger.

The ghastly visages, starting in horror and despair, the blood-dripping and shattered hands, which were free but powerless to grasp a lariat, and struggle to prolong their miserable lives in the coming last act of the tragic drama—all this was too dread and revolting to look upon; but it gave satisfaction to the executioners who knew of the vile and horrid deeds of which these miscreants had long been guilty.

Thus they stood for some seconds.

Then, again that piercing whistle cut the air, the loud lash of quirts sounding as an echo, and the mustangs, with snorts of pain and affright, sprung each forward at the moment.

Up in air the six miscreant Greasers were jerked, their eyes starting from their sockets, their mutilated hands catching wildly at the lariats, which were choking out their breath and life. But the nooses of those greased raw-hide ropes drew tighter and still tighter, the wild, flying arms, which threw spatters of blood on all sides, flew less and less wild and high.

At last they hung limp—the kicking limbs as well—and only a spasmodic twitching of the muscles showed that life remained in the hideous human forms that dangled from the limbs of the mesquite.

The mustangs had been suddenly halted in their tracks before the heads of the bandits reached the limbs.

Soon, the bodies of the murderous marauders hung, slowly swaying, silent forever, and beyond all power again to perpetrate cowardly crime.

The Texans had done their fearful work well.

The lariats were quickly detached from the saddle-horns, and secured to the trunk of a tree. Then the rancheros mounted their horses, leading the mustangs of the bandits, and with an exultant yell dashed on toward Rio Grande City.

Behind them they left, to twist and turn and sway in the breezes, until the ropes chafed through and the corpses dropped to the earth, for wolves to tear what the buzzards had left, the merciless marauders of Juan Cortina, the Scourge of the Bravo!

CHAPTER XXX.

THROUGH NIGHT TO LIGHT.

It was the afternoon following the night so eventful to many of our characters; and it was also that of the day on which Daring Dick, Big Jim, and the other slaves were slain at Dean's Ranch, that affairs occurred, which call our attention again to Rio Grande City. Again we are brought to the adobe monument of Major Ringold, near the top of the perpendicular bank of the Rio Bravo—near the brink of the dizzy height, the grand and tremendous chasm, into which Chaparral Carl hurled the bandit spies; one dead, the other living.

It was an intensely hot day. The Southern sun blazed down upon the chaparrals of the Rio Grande, upon the already baked, and seamed, and cracked earth; with a power, that would have withered the foliage of any tree, or shrub, or plant, except the cacti, and the various varieties of thorny scrubbery of that, at most seasons, extremely barren land.

Had one stood upon the monument, at three o'clock this particular afternoon, his gaze would have been attracted, westerly, up the river, by the sound of a horse, galloping at great speed down the hard, well-worn government road, used by the army wagon-trains.

From this road, as a rider reached a point near the Ringold monument, entering the street, which was a portion of the road, he could gaze over the low mesquite thickets, and the vast chasm in which the Rio Grande flowed, to the Mexican side.

The horse, that came dashing headlong into Rio Grande City, from the direction of Roma, was flecked with foam; its intelligent eyes were bloodshot, and expressed almost a frenzy of excitement, its sides were hollow, as if long deprived of food, and there was a wavering tremulousness in its mad gallop, which proved that it had been pressed at an unreasonable speed.

This horse was Racer, and his master, our friend Chaparral Carl, bestrode him.

But, it was a question whether the best and most intimate friend of the young scout would have recognized him, so greatly was he changed.

His clothing was in tatters, from dashing through thorny thickets, and along narrow chaparral paths; his eyes were bloodshot, wild, and staring, and his handsome face pale and distorted.

We, who know all that had occurred can at once account for his condition, and the emotions that torture him almost beyond human endurance.

Carl has now come from Roma.

He waited for Cortina, at the ford, in vain.

He is confident that the bandit chief has crossed the Rio Grande, at some other point.

He is also forced to believe that Dora Dean is lost to him forever; that the angelic girl has been dragged to her doom—a doom that he dared not trust himself to think of.

And, just as he rides headlong toward the first dwellings of the town, the crack of a rifle draws his attention; although fired some distance away, the practiced ear of the young man caught the direction whence the report sounded.

On the very verge of the perpendicular bank of the awful chasm of the Rio Grande, clearly outlined, is seen a horseman; a small puff of smoke rising slowly above his head.

Who, that had once seen that rider, could mistake him for another, even at such a distance; more than a thousand yards, and through that quivering and heated atmosphere?

It was Juan Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande; and Carl well knew it!

The young scout turned more ghastly than before, his eyes fairly blazed; and, with a glance down the street of the town, he turned his black steed to the right, shot past the monument, and to the verge of the awful abyss, over which he had, a few days previous, hurled two of the followers of this horseman, who had evidently now fired his carbine to draw the attention of Chaparral Carl.

Thus sitting their horses, and gazing over that tremendous chasm, these two men, upon the very edge of it—each bearing a hellish hate toward the other—silent and still remained; the horse of Carl trembling violently!

A moment, and gracefully from his head, the bandit chief raised his gorgeously-ornamented sombrero, in mocking salutation; at the same time, shooting out, over the waters, a taunting yell.

It was terrible—it was torturing to witness the mingled anguish, hatred, and desire for revenge that caused the young Texan to tremble, as did his overtaxed black steed. But a change was destined to be rung—a change that would banish the agony of Carl, and cause the derisive yell of Cortina to fly back in his teeth; making the outlaw almost strangle, with the intensity of his rage, at realizing who it was, that had outwitted him, depriving him of his fleet and favorite horse, and his fair captive.

But, to explain:

As the two equestrians thus sat, each glaring upon the other, over the great chasm of the Rio Grande, down past the *jacal* and monument, at terrific speed, dashed another horse.

This animal was black as ebony, with a triangular white space upon its forehead, and white rings around its fetlocks, and its motions were electric-like. It was truly a noble beast, and built for great speed.

It was the steed of Cortina, the Scourge.

Upon this superb horse was seated a boy, clad in new and richly embroidered and decorated buckskin. A fancy shirt, with wide and flowing collar, loosely confined by a golden cord with fringed ends; a sombrero, with a golden snake for a band, and French kid, high-topped boots—thus was the youth appareled; while, about his waist, supporting a revolver and bowie-knife of small size, was an embossed belt, having a large, square silver clasp.

Upon this clasp was deeply engraved the Lone Star of Texas, and above the star, in a crescent the following legend:

"BENITO,

THE WAIF OF THE RIO GRANDE.

From his Friend, now and ever,

LORENZO GOMEZ.

It was indeed our little friend, Benito, who galloped headlong up to the side of Chaparral Carl, mounted upon the favorite steed of the Bandit King. Carl's eyes were fixed upon Cortina.

He seemed about to drive spurs and force his horse to bound down the awful height, thus to end his torturing misery and his life.

He had not observed the coming up of Benito.

The brave and faithful lad gazed for a moment into the face of his revered friend and benefactor.

Clutching Carl's hand at length he cried out:

"Senor Carl, I have words of cheer for you. Look at this horse, and think whose it is! Look in my eyes while I speak, and listen."

"Senorita Dean is safe. She is at Rancho Gomez, waiting for you. I stole her from Cortina—I swear it, I Benito, the Waif of the Rio Grande!"

Never did a joyous expression so quickly take the place of despair and anguish as it then did upon the face of Chaparral Carl.

It was worth traveling a thousand miles to witness this particular scene in our story.

At once the young scout jerked his horse backward from the dangerous bank. Life was sweet to him since he had heard those words.

He could not speak, but he strove to urge his horse toward Benito, who had brought to him both light and life; but the lad drove spurs, and caused the black steed to bound in a circle over the clear smooth ground, while he swung his sombrero around his head in mock salutation to the bandit chief, with loud and taunting cries of triumph.

The yells reached the ear of the outlaw, causing him to become almost beside himself in his impotent rage; although it was an unusual thing for Cortina to show the slightest emotion at any time.

This was turning the tables, with a vengeance.

To infuriate the bandit leader to a greater extent, at this turn of affairs, the citizens of the town came with a rush around the monument, and understanding the situation, filled the air with insulting yells.

This was more than Cortina could bear.

He recognized his horse, and felt confident that he had been outwitted by a boy, and that the latter had also rescued his fair captive. Certain it was, that neither Chaparral Carl nor any of the rancheros could have taken the girl and the steed, or they would have slain him in his sleep.

Now, it appeared no longer so strange to the outlaw chief that his life had been spared.

The boy had not dared attempt his life for fear of a failure which would be death to himself.

These thoughts flashed through the mind of the bandit, as the exultant yells sounded from across the chasm. Then with a terrible oath, he whirled his horse half about, and Cortina shot from view into the chaparrals of Mexico.

"*Vamonos! Chaparral Carl, vamonos!*"

Thus cried Benito, as the bandit chief disappeared; the lad riding through the mob of citizens, whose cheers for the waif, and the young scout filled the air.

All the startling events, connected with Cortina's raid had been the talk of the town throughout the day; they having been told by Benito, who gained the

knowledge of what had happened on the Nueces and Frio, and the plain between them, from Dora Dean. The latter had been conducted, at once, to the ranch of Lorenzo Gomez; where she had received every care and attention.

Lorenzo had been so proud of the achievements of Benito, that he presented the boy with the clothing and outfit that has been described.

He and his family had been greatly worried, on discovering the absence of their little patient; but, missing Pinto as well, they felt certain that he had gone to meet Carl. All were nearly wild with joy at his return, and welcomed him accordingly.

None were happier now than little Benito.

But we have gotten a little off our regular trail.

When the lad shouted "*Vamonos!*" to Carl, he, after clearing the crowd, drove spurs, and at once headed for the ranch of Lorenzo Gomez; the young scout following him, half-crazed with delight. The pair reached the ranch, and sprung from their horses, to be welcomed by none other than Dora Dean herself; who, although showing strongly the effects occasioned by the recent horror, privation, and torture she had undergone, had a happy smile and welcome for the man of all men on earth to her—Chaparral Carl.

Senor Gomez and his family very considerately kept themselves in the background during the affecting meeting between Carl and Dora; for they understood, from evidences they had noticed in their fair guest, the situation of affairs.

And feeling it to be impossible to approach, much less to describe the interview of the brave and the beautiful—the circumstances and heartrending events, which could not be banished from their minds, and which, in a measure, governed their words and manner, rendering it difficult as well as painful to portray—we leave it to the imagination of the reader to judge what must have passed under the influence of the tragic events, the potency of which even the strongest love could not wholly thrust aside.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ARISING FROM THE ASHES.

We have little more to relate.

Chaparral Carl and Dora decided upon an immediate return to the Frio, notwithstanding the enfeebled condition of both. They had suffered so much in mind themselves, that they had not the heart to prolong like torture in others by their absence.

So the young Texan and the beautiful maiden, the former on a fresh horse, borrowed from their kind host, and Dora on Pinto—accompanied by Benito, on the black steed of the bandit chief—started northward, on the morning of the day following Carl's entrance into the town.

They both had insisted not only that Benito should go with him, but that he remain as their adopted brother, which the boy was but too happy to do.

With the kindest wishes from all they parted from their friends at Ranch Gomez, Lorenzo promising that he would visit Colonel Dean, and take his wife and daughters, when a reasonable time had elapsed to mitigate the grief and anguish of the colonel and his wife.

Thus went these three of the most prominent actors in our drama, and who have rarely missed being "on the boards, at rise or slide"—on through the chaparrals.

Not far had they proceeded, however, when to their surprise and pleasure they met the six rancheros, who had set out toward the Rio Grande for Dora and for revenge.

They were amazed, on being told of the exploits of Benito, who was greatly admired by them all.

They now led the way, near the spot where they had hanged the bandits; but not near enough for Dora to discover the fearful and revolting sight.

Carl, however, left his fair charge for a time, that he might satisfy the Texans, and behold the half-dozen swaying forms; the faces of the bandits having turned black, and being torn by buzzards, their eyes having been picked out by the same foul and ravenous birds.

Wolves had torn in pieces the two, who had been wounded, and afterward shot, when in the sink-hole, by the Texan avengers.

Carl remained but a moment in the vicinity of the hideous and disgusting sight; but, during that brief space, both himself and the rancheros heard the sounds of a galloping horse—the animal coming from the north, and seeming to be dashing directly toward Dora.

All rode up eagerly, to the point at which they had left the maiden; and great was the amazement of all, mingled with pleasure, at beholding Colonel Dean, with his lost darling clasped to his breast.

The change in the old colonel, since the morning on which he was introduced to the reader, was simply astounding. He seemed to have aged almost a score of years. He looked entirely broken up, haggard, wild, and his features drawn and wrinkled.

But the change for the better was surprising to all, when Dora had ridden, for a short time, by her father's side. All the daring deeds of Carl and Benito were then told him.

In time, our friends reached the Rio Nueces. Benito to insisting upon speeding on ahead, and relieving the mind of Mrs. Dean; and when the cavalcade reached, and entered the southern end of the avenue—what did they behold?"

Nothing else, dear reader, than Dean's Ranch! They rubbed their eyes. Had the recent horrors been dreams?

But, on they went. As they drew nearer, however, they saw that, although an exact counterpart of the old ranch was before them, the logs had all been recently hewn—that the building had been erected in the same spot as its predecessor, and was exactly like it, in size, shape, in fact in every particular.

And, to increase the surprise and joy of all, as they rode up to the veranda, Benito led out upon the same, by the hand, none other than Mrs. Dean—her grief and suffering having been changed to relief and joy, by the knowledge that her daughter was safe; and that she, with the colonel and Carl, were at hand.

To describe the reunion would be impossible.

It appeared, that the rancheros, from all around, had met, and erected a log dwelling, in the absence

of Colonel Dean. None knew whither he had gone, but believed he had set out for the Rio Grande, and they were confident he would either meet or overtake their six neighbors.

Major Humphries—so Carl was informed—had started for Ringold Barracks with his command, the wounded being taken in ambulances.

The major had taken a more easterly course than when coming to the Nueces, thus not meeting the young scout and his party.

Captain Littleton, the morning following the fight, started for Resaca de la Palma, where Colonel John Ford, and Captains Donaldson and Nolan, with Littleton's men, were encamped. The rangers felt that after such a defeat Cortina would be furious for revenge, and would, without doubt, make a dash over the Rio Grande. And they were right.

But the bandits were forced to return at speed, without doing much damage.

Six months after the startling occurrences that have been recorded, Carl Clayton and Dora Dean were united in the bonds of wedlock, they, as was asserted by all present, being as handsome a couple as ever thus clasped hands in the Lone Star State.

The old colonel and his wife, although they at times grieved for poor Dick, were thankful to God that they had not been more deeply bereaved; for at one time neither of them believed that they would ever see Dora or Carl again. They had, indeed, lost a son, but they had found two. For no more affectionate, kind and noble sons did any pair ever possess, than were Carl and Benito to Colonel Dean and his wife.

Another dwelling was erected, near that of the old folks, by Carl; and this became the home of himself and Dora.

Carl disposed of his real estate in Galveston, which, by this time had greatly increased in value, and restocked Dean's Ranch.

In time, it was ascertained that Benito was the son of a wealthy ranchero of Eagle Pass; he having been stolen from his parents, when very small, from motives of revenge. Soon left by his abductor to shift for himself, the boy had naturally glided into a wandering life.

Benito Lopez—as his name proved to be—thus provided for, became happy and prosperous.

And beautiful children came to bless the union of Carl and Dora. These filled the hearts of the old colonel and his wife with joy and pride; the happiness of all, when compared with the misery they had suffered, during the terrible days following the advent of Cortina on the Rio Nueces, being as Heaven to Hades.

And never had man a more devoted friend and ally, than Chaparral Carl ever found in

"THE WAIF OF THE RIO GRANDE."

THE END.

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